クドリャフカの順番

Welcome to KANYA FESTA!

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Hyouka: Volume 3

From Baka-Tsuki

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1 - A Sleepless Night

001 - ♥01

As I couldn't sleep, I decided to take a walk outside.

The history of the Chitanda clan can be traced back to the beginning of the Edo period.

The large fields in the north of Kamiyama City used to be a farm village. As the leaders of the village, the Chitanda clan has maintained, farmed and rented out the land around here. As representatives of the village, they were charged with negotiating the taxes with the feudal lords as well as acting as the local magistrates. They were also involved in projects for improving farming products. And of course, they would represent the village and take part in the annual festivals in spring and autumn.

The land here isn't truly blessed by nature. Though the soil is rich, the area is vulnerable to typhoons as well as blizzards. After all, this land wasn't really well irrigated until irrigation works were carried out during the Edo period. Just a minor change in the climate would result in crop failure, so it was natural for the previous farmers to fear and worship the gods.

As people of prestigious wealth, the Chitanda clan would represent the mortals in carrying out the rituals during the festivals. As they would be offering their wealth to the gods in the shrine on behalf of everyone else, before the laying of the crops and after harvest, as well as during Obon and New Year, they would go around collecting food and drink from the village folk. It would seem that this was considered a form of payment in lieu of money for renting land from the Chitanda clan. In turn, the leasing of land would form the basis of their wealth.

After the war, as part of the land reforms, the Chitanda clan, like all other large landowners, were compelled to sell most of the land they held to the

government. Yet, Chitanda Shounosuke, the leader of the clan then, saw this as an opportunity to use the money from the land sales to modernize the farming equipment as quickly as possible, and profit from the new farming techniques. As such, Shounosuke was able to slowly buy back the land that was sold off, and by the time my father became head of the clan, theChitandas had reclaimed nearly half of what was once their land, which was considered to be quite large during the late Showa period.

This may sound like me boasting, but Chitanda Shounosuke was not simply a man with business acumen, he was also a trustworthy man, as well as my grandfather. Though as he died early on, I do not remember much of him.

Anyway, the Chitanda clan had managed to weather the chaos during and after the war and maintained their status. As a result, they are still in charge of representing the local community during the festivals.

To begin with, contrary to what Fukube-san had said, the Chitanda clan aren't exactly so rich as to tower above everyone else. As a result, the annual festivities were reduced from four times a year to just twice, during spring and autumn, and the symbolic "payment" these days was merely a bottle of wine. As such, the ritual was merely an excuse for everyone to gather and have a feast. Though as I can't drink, I can't take part in the feast myself.

The spring and autumn festivals would take place in a small shrine worshiping the "village god", which was a minor deity. There would be the usual rituals of a lion dance and carrying of the mikoshi [1]. A person from the Chitanda clan would act as representative for the shrine pilgrims and pray for a peaceful year during the spring festival, as well as give thanks during the autumn festival.

And I too have been participating in such a festival ever since I was old enough to remember. I often get asked by my friends living nearby as well as visitors to the shrine as to what it is that I do during such a ritual, though I didn't exactly have to do much. There wasn't much to notice besides having to pay attention not to make many sounds until the end of the praying ceremony. So it's just the usual clapping your hands during a prayer.

As for me, I'm not a particularly religious person. To some degree, I'm not too different from my schoolmates. Maybe it has something to do with my experience in such festivals. Though it may be bothersome, whenever I visit a shrine, I make it a habit to hide what I'm wishing. I'm not sure whether this meant I had faith in the gods, or whether this is just my systematic way of calming myself whenever I'm feeling insecure. From time to time, I feel curious about it, but I have never found an answer.

Recently, my wish had been granted during the high school entrance exams. It had also been granted during the "Hyouka Incident", as it was named by Fukube-san.

And once again, tonight I find myself heading towards the shrine.

The Kamiyama High School Cultural Festival begins tomorrow. And for our Classics Club, which is just one of the many illustrious arts-based clubs in Kamiyama High School, a troubling situation awaits us, and we can find no solution to it. Though we intend to give it our best... it would seem we still need luck on our side.

After placing a 100 yen coin into the offering box within the confines of the moon-lit shrine, I clapped my hands together and closed my eyes as my thoughts for my friends in the Classics Club appeared.

Ibara Mayaka-san, Fukube Satoshi-san, Oreki Houtarou-san.

I wonder if Mayaka-san is sleeping well tonight?

Right now, she must be blaming herself for the predicament the Classics Club has found itself in. But that was not the case. Compared to Mayaka-san, I was totally of no help. If only I had been able to give my all and help out with her work, we could have avoided this altogether. So I too must bear some of the responsibility.

I wonder if Fukube-san is sleeping well tonight?

Sometimes I do suspect whether Fukube-san's hedonistic-like behaviour comes from the bottom of his heart. At the very least, he sure wasn't acting selfishly, as there's no way I could imagine him just laughing away at Mayaka-san's pain.

I wonder if Oreki-san is sleeping well tonight?

...He probably is sleeping well. If he wasn't, I would be very worried.

From time to time, I often find Oreki-san being able to sharply observe things that are out of the ordinary. I might even say that I was moved by it. But most of the time Oreki-san, how should I put it, tends to be slow in getting things done. So it's hard to determine whether he's a reliable person or not.

I prayed for everyone's well-being.

I prayed for luck to befall us for the next three days. Please let us overcome this "mountain".

As I opened my eyes, I still felt rather uneasy about it, so I took out another 50 yen from my purse.

002 - ♣01

As I couldn't sleep, I took out the pamphlet from underneath my pillow.

Participating Club Comments (By Order of Registration):

Kendo Club Exhibition Match: Kamiyama High School vs Kamiyama Industrial High. Highlights include the showdown between the prefecture's ace captains.

Breakdancing Club Leave the Opening Ceremony to us. The quality of our new members is quite high, so please look forward to it.

Social Dance Club Floor dancing in the Gymnasium on Day 2 at 3pm. All are welcome.

Chorus Club Performing in the Gymnasium on Day 2 starting at 10am. Seeking new recruits. (lol)

Drama Club Original play on Day 3 at 9am, featuring improvised script from the Prefectural Competition version.

Detective Fiction Study Club Mystery Lunch on Day 1 at 11:30am.

Fashion Study Club Fashion show at the Fashion Room every day from 1am to 2pm. Recruiting models.

Manga Study Club Selling anthology in Preparation Room No. 1. Review of 100 manga, old and new. Do come visit.

Chemistry Club Behold the power of sodium. Dangerous, so we will not be responsible for injuries caused. Chemistry Room.

Class 2-F Movie *The Blind Spot of 10,000 People*. Can you guess its surprise ending? Airing schedules on separate page.

Cheering Club and Cheerleading Club Combined performance on the School Grounds on Day 1 at 2pm.

Tea Ceremony Club The traditional Kanya Festival open air tea ceremony will be held as usual at Shiroyama Park!

Art Club Prefectural Art Exhibition winner *The Eulogy of Blue* now on display in the Art Room. Please do come have a look!

Marching Band Floor Drill in the Gymnasium on Day 3 at 2pm.

Ink Painting Club Exhibition held together with the Art Club in the Art Room.

Charms Association In the Class 2-E classroom. We do all sorts of charms. Freebies available!

Literature Club Anthology *Kodama* on sale in Preparation Room No. 3. 200yen per volume.

Hyakunin Isshu Club[2] P, please..... Won't anyone play with us.....

Occult Studies Club Exhibition in the Class 1-F classroom. This is serious research, so please think twice if you're merely coming out of interest.

Quiz Study Club Quiz Contest on the School Grounds on Day 1 at 1pm. We await your participation. Prizes available.

Astronomy Club The Kanya Festival is only held during the daytime, man. We can't see no stars, man. So we ended up doing models of the Solar System instead.

Class 1-C Theatrical play *Happy Tales of Hans Christian Andersen* on the Gymnasium Stage on Day 1 at 2pm.

Broadcast Club Introducing the latest happenings in the Kanya Festival every day from 12:30pm via the school's PA broadcast. You'll have to hear it even if you don't want to.

Abacus Club Featuring speed abacus calculations as seen on TV in Preparation Room No. 4, Special Block.

Debate Club English debate competition from Day 1, 11am to Day 3, 2pm in the Class 3-B classroom.

Koto Club[3] Recital performances held twice every morning and once every afternoon. More detailed schedules posted in front of the Japanese-style Room.

Rakugo Study Club[4] Performance on the Stage from Day 1 at 9am. Just when we thought we were the first to perform, the Breakdancing Club had... (T_T)

Calligraphy Club Exhibition in the Calligraphy Room.

Kado Club[5] Exhibition in the 1st floor corridor. Please stop by to have a look.....

Biology Club Model of natural habitat of Kamiyama. As a self-made diorama, this is a bit too grandiose that people can't tell which club it came from.

Shogi Club Kanya Cup tournament. Waiting time per player is 30 minutes. Grand prizes await. In Class 1-G.

Miniature Club Exhibition in the Physics Lecture Room. Featuring the battleship USS Enterprise. We also sell cute replicas.

Film Studies Club Self-made movie *Completion*. In the Audio-Visual Room. Schedules on separate page.

Photography Club Exhibition in Class 3-G classroom. Also featuring demonstration of old-fashioned flash-powder photography.

Movie Study Club Showing of movie *Cinema Paradiso*[6] (1989 Italy) in the Audio-Visual Room.

Sci-Fi Studies Club Featuring last year's Seiun Award[7] Best Media Winner in the Audio-Visual Room. Title is...

Physics Club We made a robot. A bipedal one. Though he can only push a baby pram.

Global Act Club Exhibition in Class 3-E classroom. Please come visit.

History Club Reconstruction of model of Kamaiyama Castle, aka "Shiroyama" (Castle Hill). Come marvel at its defense and discover how it ultimately fell.

Handicraft Club Featuring the Mandala carpet. Though this may come from me, it does seem to emit some sort of divine ambiance.

Confectionery Studies Club We will be selling confectionery "within the confines of the school rules concerning club activities" in the home economics room. Please do come!

Light Music Club Though we're more of a band, this time we'll be registering as the Light Music Club. All day in the Martial Arts Dojo.

Go Club Beginners Seminar in Preparation Room No. 2. There will of course be tutorial matches as well.

A Capella Club Stationed at Class 3-C. Will be performing in the School Courtyard on Day 1 at 11am. Please come listen!

Wall Newspaper Club Special Edition published every two hours during Kanya Festival. Featuring the latest and hottest topics being discussed.

The Cooking Club Cooking battle "Wild Fire" on the School Grounds on Day 2 at 11am! Seeking participants.

Gardening Club Cooking harvested sweet potatoes.....But this isn't gardening, it's farming! Are you sure this is okay, prez?

Brass Band Club Performing a different song everyday from 1pm in the Gymnasium.

Magic Club Stall at 2-D classroom. Stage performance Day 1 at 11:30am. Please look forward to it.

Fortune Telling Association Next to the stairs on the 3rd floor.

Classics Club Why is the Kami High Cultural Festival called the "Kanya Festival"? The answer is in our anthology *Hyouka*. 200yen per volume in the Geology Lecture Room.

Organizing Committee:

Kugayama Muneyoshi (Student Council President, Kanya Festival

Executive Committee President) You guys are overdoing this. That's all I'll say.

Yazaki Keita (Student Council Vice President) The Organizing Committee can be found in the Student Council Room. Do visit us if there's anything you wish to discuss.

Shoukawa Harumi (Student Council Vice President) At last a job well done... I get that feeling a lot. Guys, let's see this through without regrets.

Funabashi Masaharu (Cultural Committee President) On top of the Kanya Prize Awards, we'll be adding a Best Club Award this year. Compete with all you've got, young ones!

Tanabe Jirou (General Committee President) We've prepared plenty of rubbish and recycle bins, but please make sure you put everything in the right bins.

After reading them in one go, I placed them back on my pillow satisfactorily. On the cover of the pamphlet were big words in Gothic font that read *Kanya Festival Guide*, and underneath it a smaller caption which read "The 42nd Kamiyama High School Cultural Festival". This was created by the Council General Committee, of which I, Fukube Satoshi, was a member.

By the way, besides being a member of the General Committee, I'm also a member of the dexterous Handicraft Club as well as the prestigious Classics Club. As to which club was the busiest for me... I guess it'd have to be the Classics Club.

When I was drafted by the Committee President into the making of the festival pamphlet, I thought it would have been a simple job of merely copying last year's pamphlet format. But on the contrary, it was a rather difficult task. Though it was hard work, it is quite interesting when one puts in the effort to work on it.

As something of a reward, one of the privileges of dealing with such a difficult task was that I got to decide what materials to use, which was pretty interesting to say the least. As a result, I decided to play a little prank with the last section of this pamphlet, "Participating Club Comments".

For last year's pamphlet, the clubs were ordered according to the Japanese hiragana spelling, but I decided to change it into the order in which the clubs registered with us. When I made the proposal to the Committee President, saying that "For an official guidebook, it's not really fair that the

A Capella Club always gets to start every year in such a conspicuous starting position", my motive was quite simple, really. At the very least, I would arrange to have the comments of one of my clubs, the Classics Club, placed in a noticeable position. Though the Committee President was doubtful to begin with, he soon agreed and the motion was passed unanimously. Under the official pretext of "registration order", the Kendo Club was the first to register, so there was no way I could move that from the starting position. But in turn, I get to mix up the order at the end. After all, it's much more noticeable if you're standing out "right in the middle".

Well, it's not exactly a grand PR effort. So rather than being pleased for advertising for the Classics Club, I was more pleased at my superiority in making such minor manipulation of the materials.

And so, to quote from Vice President Shoukawa, "At last a job well done". Besides work in the General Committee, work in the Handicraft Club was tough too. Just who was it that proposed making a Mandala carpet to begin with? Though as it was enjoyable, I guess I can't complain too much, but it was tiring for the eyes, sewing that stuff. With so much time spent on the General Committee and the Handicraft Club, my time with the Classics Club was brief in contrast. Conclusions cannot be made from databases alone, after all. With so little time left, I do wonder sometimes how on earth I wrote such an interesting essay for the anthology.

I Wonder where I should go tomorrow. At any rate, the Quiz Contest is a must. As it's held by the Quiz Study Club, their members can't participate in the competition, so that's got my attention. As for Day 2, the Cooking Contest looked quite interesting. I've decided on making a seafood fried rice dish, as I won't lose to anyone in that department.

I'm more worried about Mayaka being depressed about it. Well, she's a strong girl. Objectively speaking, her responsibility was relatively light. Though Chitanda-san may be quite worried, I'm pretty optimistic about it. We may not be able to do anything now, but somehow we'll get by.

Oh, I'm so looking forward to this Cultural Festival. And thus, the Classics Club will attempt to claw back from the jaws of failure.

How fantastic to have to face such a challenge which we have to climb

through!

Anyway, I'd better get some sleep and prepare for tomorrow. It would be a serious blunder for Fukube Satoshi if he were to run out of energy for such an event.

003 - ♠01

As the owls outside kept on hooting, I ended up not feeling sleepy at all.

I was thinking about whether I should read a book, but I couldn't find anything that interested me on the bookshelf. So I went down to the living room, picking up the remote control to see what was on TV, but there wasn't anything interesting on. With no other choice left, I went to the dust-covered desktop PC in the corner of the room and turned it on.

This PC used to belong to my sis. Now it's become the Oreki family's common web hub. In practice I'm the only one that ever uses it, even though I'm not really that interested in spending time on the net. This machine was no old model, and was equipped with the ability to do calculations and store memory that I could never emulate, yet all I ever used it for was to check the web once or twice a week for any news. In other words, it was quite a pitiful machine.

The search engine website popped up. At first I thought of clicking on the news... but I changed my mind and entered "Kamiyama High School" in the search box. A number of links appeared, and I duly entered my school's website. This wasn't the first time I've visited the site, as besides the usual stuff about the origins of the school and description of its activities, it's also got a chatroom for current students, which was where I went before.

As for what I was looking for, it was of course the Kamiyama High School Cultural Festival. There's bound to be something about it found on the net. And as I expected, on the top of the website was a banner written in large typeface font "1 Day Remaining till Kanya Festival". At the side of the screen was an animation of a pair of male and female Kamiyama High students in uniform carrying stuff around. Other stuff on the page included the festival schedule, participating groups, traffic access, notice to visitors, and web store.

I have no idea how many groups have participated, but the site sure listed

quite a lot. The page was full of photos, illustrations and handmade maps with loads of information on them, making navigation pretty easy. After seeing all of these in one glance, I decided to have a look at my own club, the Classics Club, but it was at this moment that the connection went off. I don't know where the problem came from, but from time to time, this PC just seems to have quite an unstable connection. Ah well, as I decided to go back to sleep, I heard someone coming down the stairs. As the footsteps were quite soft, I knew it was my sis right away. As it's quite bothersome to have to squeeze past each other in a narrow staircase, I decided to sit on the chair and wait for her to come down.

The footsteps entered the kitchen nearby, and the fridge door could be heard being opened, as well as the sound of glasses being taken out.

As I was about to make my way to my room, a voice called out,
"Houtarou,"
My guess of who the footsteps belonged to was spot on. It was my sister's voice, which sounded half asleep.

"You have a Cultural Festival tomorrow, right?"

I turned my face towards the kitchen.

"Yeah."

"Better get to sleep soon."

"Wha?"

I made an idiotic exclamation. I sure didn't want to have her tell me to go to sleep the same way she would nag at me about eating with my mouth closed or remind to bring my tissues when I go out. Though I didn't want to say it out loud, because if I did, it would just lead to more trouble.

For some reason, she didn't seem to care as she poured something into her glass and drank it in one gulp and said, "...You seem to be having some problem anyway."

I didn't answer.

Once again, she poured a bit more of what she was drinking into her glass.

"I can tell what you're thinking just from your reaction. Anyway, the Classics Club is bound to encounter some trouble during the Cultural Festival. Think of it as something of a tradition."

Hmph, a curse huh?

"You sure have entered some troublesome club, really."

"Really?"

I so felt like retorting her right away, as she was the one who asked me to enter the Classics Club in the first place.

Upon enrolling in Kamiyama High School this year, I received a request from my sis, who was an alumnus of the Classics Club, to keep the club alive even if it meant just filling my name in. I originally expected to fully enjoy being the sole member of a club that does nothing, but it was not to be, as a girl called Chitanda joined the Classics Club for a purpose. Upon solving that "purpose" of hers, the Classics Club had ended up with four members. That chain of bothersome events was named the "Hyouka Incident" by Satoshi, and I ended up having to write an anthology essay about it.

By the way, I still don't know what the Classics Club does exactly. Normally one would expect a club called the Classics Club to involve the study of classic literature, but none of its current members seem to be that sort of people. As we have no seniors to tell us what kind of club it used to be, we've somehow lost our raison d'être. But personally speaking, I'm thankful it's ended up that way.

So, besides filling in the members' names, in order for a club to continue its existence, club activities must be held. As one of the officially recognized school clubs, we have a meagre club activity budget allocated to us for the purpose of "Anthology Compilation". And making use of these funds, we ended up publishing the essay anthology *Hyouka*. There were many twists and turns along the way, but we've finally completed it.

And we will be selling them during the Cultural Festival, which starts

tomorrow.

...Well, it was here that we encountered some problem. So my sis was totally spot on when she said "You seem to be having some problem anyway."

By the way, since it's my sis, she's bound to know what kind of activities the Classics Club is involved in. Yet lately she's been away from the country until just a while ago. By the time she returned, it didn't really matter anymore whether I asked her what kind of club the Classics Club was.

Anyway, subjectively speaking, I didn't particularly hate this club that I had joined. So instead of retorting to my sis, I said, "If there is such a cursed tradition, why don't you give me some charm or something, sis?"

"Are you trying to extort me?"

After being speechless for a while, I felt something flying towards me from behind. Just when I thought was she really handing some sort of charm to me, the thing I caught didn't have anything divine about it. It was a fountain pen. Though it wasn't divine, it sure had style, being deep black in colour with a dull silver lining along its sides. It's probably not cheap.

"You can take that."

"...Should I say thanks?"

"By the way, it's out of ink, and the nib's broken."

Stop throwing garbage around! After hearing her place something back in the fridge, her footsteps left the kitchen and went into the corridor, where she said, "...I'll come over to visit if I have time!"

"No, don't," I replied immediately.

Even if we're going to have loads of cases, having her come would just make things unbearable. I heard no reply from her as she walked up the stairs.

I lay on my bed.

Since I was waiting to fall asleep, I wasn't particularly thinking anything. Before long I closed my eyes and sighed deeply.

Today, or to be more precise, yesterday, we wasted a whole day preparing for the Cultural Festival. Currently the Kamiyama High School Cultural Festival officially spans four days, but as the first day was basically preparations, it was really only open for three days. The real thing starts tomorrow.

Satoshi seemed intent on having fun. That was to be expected, so it's not surprising. However, "enjoying the Cultural Festival" was definitely not something that "I have to do". I would have simply taken a nap in some corner of the school until the whole thing was over. So, even though I won't say something uncooperative like "This Cultural Festival business is boring", I would still stay true to my creed and utter my motto: "If I don't have to do it, I won't. If I have to do it, make it quick". I did not participate much anyway.

To be frank, even if I did nothing, it would still be counted as me having "participated". Since all we'll be doing is sitting there all day and selling the anthologies which we worked so hard writing. That was the original plan anyway.

Naturally, when the problem arose, we did not blame anyone. If there was someone to blame, then all of us were to blame. So as it's partly my fault, in order to cover my own ass, it became something that "I have to do".

The problem was, would I be able to "do it quickly"?

That said, even if the problem was not solved, it could be said that it was mere small potatoes. It was not something that must be undone. So Chitanda's worrying too much about this. She ought to think more like a happy energy-saver.

Neither pessimistic nor optimistic, like *Que Sera, Sera*, I was calmly facing come what may as I waited to fall asleep.

I woke up in the middle of the night and got to thinking.

Oreki may have guessed incorrectly, but I'm not a perfectionist. While failure is to be expected if one does not prepare or research enough, it also occurs even when one has made every preparation possible. So while it's possible for other people to fail, naturally it's also possible for me to fail as well. So if I am to forgive others for their errors, I shouldn't be so unforgiving to myself. Yet I'm feeling angry. Even if everyone has forgiven me, sometimes I can't forgive myself. I can do nothing but be angry at my own failure. But why?

A while ago, Fuku-chan told me this: "Well, Mayaka, if you think calmly about it, it's no big matter. So you shouldn't worry too much."

"I'm not worrying. And it's not like I want to hear such common reasoning."

Fuku-chan crossed his arms and looked down while grunting deeply. Even though he was doing it on purpose, I didn't dislike that part of him.

"...From how I see it, I don't think you've ever been this angry regardless of whether you succeeded or failed, as well as whether you're a perfectionist or not."

"Really?"

Feeling interested, I stretched myself forward and asked, "Then why am I angry?"

"It's hard for me to explain. Though I may have a rich vocabulary, my knowledge of useful words is rather limited."

"So you know a lot of useless terms?"

"Well, there's 'tank desant' [8] and 'dumb luck'... No, that's not the point. For example, you know Houtarou's 'energy-saving' creed, right?"

I nodded honestly.

"That's what he calls it anyway. When Oreki is doing something, it's hard to tell whether he's doing it to 'save energy'."

"Even though you've known him for so long?"

"As if I would observe him all the time."

Fuku-chan smiled bitterly.

"Anyway, leaving Houtarou aside, in some way, if that creed were applied to you, then you're neither 'correct' nor 'perfect'. Now I'm not saying this to incur your wrath, as I mean something else altogether."

So that's what he's going on about, I thought to myself. To begin with, I never liked conversations involving myself, and so the conversation shifted to something else altogether.

Anyway, what's important now is that I could not sleep since I'm still feeling quite pissed off. Seriously, even though I've double-checked so many times, how on earth could I have neglected something so basic? And why didn't I notice the error being made after it had happened?

What was even more infuriating was that I would be unable to help out in rectifying the mistake come the Cultural Festival, as there was no way I could leave my activities with the Manga Study Club aside. Even though Fuku-chan did say "It's not really a big mistake, so don't think too much about it."

Argh, this pisses me off. I'm so angry at my own carelessness.

But, as infuriating as it may sound, Oreki was absolutely right when he said, in that buoyant manner of his, while avoiding my gaze when we were alone, "This isn't something you should fuss over. If you keep fussing over it, then not only Satoshi, but even Chitanda will have to fuss over it for you,

right?"

It was just as he had put it. Even though I was the one being careless, when Chi-chan came, her face went pale as though it were her own responsibility. At the very least, I don't want to see Chi-chan spend the entire Cultural Festival with such a face.

So, for just a little bit, I tried to forgive myself. Try as I may, upon being reminded of that scene, I just couldn't calm myself down!

Guess I have no choice.

I must be so personally involved with the Kamiyama High School Cultural Festival that I've become too stressed out. Yet it was not good for me to lose sleep like this.

I got out of my futon and took out the bottle of sleeping pills from the first aid box, though I didn't really like taking those.

I took out one pill and cut it in half, and swallowed that piece of white medicine.

2 - The Cases That Keep Piling Up

2.1 - Has Something Happened With the Classics Club?

005 - ♠02

Saying "I enjoyed this a lot" may sound easy, but is actually a pretty difficult task. Rather than the possibility of the difference in one's level of understanding, a more important factor would be the difference in one's level of interest. When watching a magic performance, a dense person would not even understand even a hundredth of what was going on. On the other hand, if one had the ability to see through a magician's trick, then no matter how much entertainment he may see, while he may try to enjoy to his heart's content, there's no way he could have enjoyed it sufficiently.

It was morning, and I was walking to school earlier than usual, as the Kamiyama High School Cultural Festival starts today. Seeing Fukube Satoshi constantly repeating "Ohh, I'm so looking forward to enjoying this," I felt compelled to mischievously tell him the above, to which Satoshi responded with a frightful smile and slowly shook his head.

"An excellent idea, was what I wanted to say, but you're too naive, Houtarou,"

"Oh? How so?"

"For a person like you who was raised on nothing but boorishness to even think of lecturing me on my enjoyment, you're too naive," he said as he raised his index finger and swung it left and right as though acting.

"Of course I already knew that it was useless to try to enjoy myself deep down, within the marrow of my bones. The most important aspect of Epicureanism is to be able to separate one's senses. It's just as important as the day when you finally give up your energy-saving ways and actually work hard on a test."

"Like hell that day would arrive. Anyway, what's this about separation of your senses? What does that have to do with you being able to say you'll enjoy yourself?"

"All right, then let me enlighten you. First, I wouldn't think of saying something like "I'm gonna enjoy a lot," as I'm a fairly easy to please person. You know what I'm good at resigning myself to? Just from the point of view of Houtarou the Boorish."

Do you know? Satoshi gestured as he finished his sentence. Fleeting a glimpse at him, as I had no intention of bursting his bubble, I said nothing. Sensing I had no intention to answer, he lowered his voice as though informing me of a secret and said, "Even if I'm not good at enjoying myself.…. "

" ….. "

He gave a broad smile.

"I could still look forward to people giving me their enjoyment!"

Oh boy.

Ignoring my cold expression, Satoshi continued with his talk of how he's still "gonna enjoy this." I could do nothing but keep quiet and smile bitterly.

Fukube Satoshi. I have been hanging out with this fellow since junior high.

From his appearance, Satoshi was a person with brown eyes and a slim figure that might be mistaken as that of a girl when seen from afar. And while he may seem like a weakling, he has developed some amazing leg muscles due to his penchant for cycling.

Though his real features lie with his mental state. You may have caught a glimpse of that from our conversation just now; he can be pretty forceful in abandoning his studies and social life casually. Already a member of the Handicraft Club and the General Committee, he decided to join the Classics Club as well simply because "it sounded interesting."

He is never seen without his drawstring bag in his hand, though I have no

idea of its contents. All I can say is that it contains all sorts of stuff.

In the road ahead, we could see Kamiyama High School appearing. The outer walls weren't painted pink due to the Cultural Festival, and seen from afar, it looked no different from any other regular high school. However, within its grounds were flourishing all sorts of activities concerning the Cultural Festival. In order to prepare for the festival, classes were suspended since yesterday.

The body of students heading towards school looked different today. While there were many in their uniforms, there were also many from other clubs in their casual wear. And there were many who did not carry any bag with them, as there was no need to bring any scholastic equipment. Due to such discrepancies, even I could feel the expectation that something different from usual was about to start.

Though Kamiyama High School is a school geared towards students entering university, it didn't have that many supplementary classes, neither did it have a particularly high record of students entering famous universities. If you were to ask the students of Kamiyama High School what its specialty was, only one in ten would have said it specializes in university entrance exams. The other nine would answer "It's a school known for its vibrant Arts-related club activities." There are many kinds of arts-related clubs in Kami High, and its activities too are various. And the highlight of these activities would of course be the Cultural Festival, which was rare amongst high schools for its number of days, with one day for preparation and three whole days for the main event.

Satoshi suddenly raised his voice cheerfully.

"And besides... Why, Houtarou, isn't that Mayaka?"

He pointed to a girl in front of us. She was dressed in casual wear comprising of a red cardigan and white brocade trousers, but I couldn't tell whether she was Ibara Mayaka from behind. Though I've known her since elementary school, I've rarely seen her in casual wear since junior high. But if Satoshi says it's her, then it has to be.

For many times Ibara had confessed her love to Satoshi, yet while Satoshi

was not one to fall into self-loathing, he had chosen to evade her advances time and time again. I couldn't figure out why he's done so even if I wanted to.

"I'll be going on ahead."

He turned and said that before running off towards that girl ahead of us.

As I moved forward, I was certain that it was indeed Mayaka. Though seeking Houtarou out in a crowd was like trying to look for a needle in a haystack, there was no way I could miss Mayaka. I ran up and tapped her on the shoulder.

"Hey, Mayaka. Morning!"

Knowing her, she would have stared at me and said "Hey! That hurts!" Which was why I only tapped her softly. Though it seemed Mayaka didn't seem to be in that mood today, as she became stiff and turned her head slowly.

"...Morning."

She muttered only that and turned back forward. *Ahh, I see*. I exclaimed to myself and smiled (which was what I'm good at; I've long forgotten how to make a serious face), and I answered Mayaka's anxiety.

"Your costume suits you."

"R-really?"

"So, who are you cospla..."

I could not finish my sentence, as I could feel a jab into my stomach. Great aim. Due to that hit, my abdominal muscles quickly lost their strength, so its effect was immediate.

Mayaka murmured with a dangerous glimmer in her eyes, "Don't use that term in front of normal people."

Well, I don't think "costume play" would be considered taboo nowadays. Though I do get that Mayaka's feeling pretty embarrassed about it, so I wouldn't say anything. By the way, I already knew that she was planning to cosplay today. Mayaka's Manga Studies Club had asked for permission from the General Committee to turn up in casual clothing. As there were not enough changing rooms at school, the General Committee granted that permission.

Mayaka wore off-white brocade trousers and a scarlet cardigan. It was a pragmatic costume that was able to withstand the cool autumn winds of early October. Some accessories were attached to her cardigan, and inside she wore a white collared shirt, and a thick looking belt was wrapped around her abdomen. The main point would probably be this belt.

I looked at her costume from top to bottom. Hmm, I just don't have a clue. Guess I'll ask her again.

"So, what costume is this?"

Like a rat trying not to alert the cat, I carefully chose the right words so that Mayaka may accept my question. She quickly looked forward and said in a detached manner,

"Frol,"

"Frol? Frolbericheri Frol[9]? You're wearing her costume?"

"Yeah... I also brought this handbag."

I wouldn't get what she was referring to even if she said so. Well, that's what Mayaka wanted to wear after all. When she learned that her club required her to come in cosplay, being the shy person that she is, she would definitely choose a character that was hard to recognize.

Ibara Mayaka. As I was a guy, she was way shorter than me, but then as a girl she was way shorter than others. If she wasn't dressed in her sailor uniform, she would no doubt be mistaken as an elementary schoolkid. And right now, Mayaka wasn't dressed in her sailor uniform. And it's not just her figure that's small, just observing from the features of her face alone, one could say Mayaka was baby-faced.

Yet it was hard to figure out Mayaka's vigorous sense of justice from her childish expression emanating from her childish face. For example, when she's angry, she would simply bite her lips. Naturally, nothing can replace the smile that she was born with. (On the other hand, from my years of hanging out with him, Houtarou sure has bad eyes for not being able to notice that.)

I'd better stop looking into someone cosplaying a character she didn't feel like cosplaying, so I began spinning my drawstring bag and said, "Well, anyway, good luck with your role. I'll pop in at the Manga Studies Club later."

Mayaka showed some shyness as she nodded softly.

"You have to contribute articles for the Manga Club as well, right?"

"Yeah."

"I read it... Must be tough, to hold similar positions in both the Classics Club and Manga Club."

"It is tough. Since nobody else was willing to contribute."

I was originally planning to congratulate her for her hard work, but all of a sudden her gaze suddenly became sharp. Oops, looks like the conversation is headed in the wrong direction. For the Classics Club manuscript to arrive so late, no matter how one looks at it, I couldn't offer any excuse. So I decided to change the topic.

"Ah... so, Mayaka, you'll be with the Manga Studies Club all day then?"
Though she didn't look pleased that the topic was changed, she nodded.

"Will you be stopping by the Classics Club?"

"Nah, it's probably impossible for me to leave the Manga Club in the morning. And besides, it's not worth it for me to just stop by... I really ought to have followed things through."

I deepened my smile and patted Mayaka on the back.

"Try not to think too much about it! It can't be helped once you wake up from it!"

Mayaka gave an ambiguous smile and nodded at my words. No, this doesn't look right. Such a grey-looking smile wouldn't be what makes Mayaka look great.

Even though Mayaka said she's fine with it, there are occasions when Houtarou expresses doubt at my evasion of her advances. Well, Houtarou was never one to flatter people. I could tell him the reason, but I wasn't sure if he would understand even a tenth of it. To begin with, this is a problem between me and Mayaka alone, so it doesn't matter whether Houtarou understands it or not.

Before we realized, we had arrived at the school gates. I turned to have a look at the gates, which had huge, colourful flowers hanging over them. This was the hard work of the General Committee, made to welcome visitors to the Cultural Festival. A banner hung from the outside of one of the windows of the school building, which read "The 42nd Kamiyama High School Cultural Festival."

And so it begins.

I wonder if I'm making a face that's trying to enjoy all this. As I was in a trance looking at the school grounds, Mayaka suddenly jabbed her elbow at me.

"Fuku-chan... Try not to do anything silly during the Cultural Festival, okay? While you may not find it embarrassing, it'd be embarrassing enough for me."

Heh, guess I'm not trusted at all, eh?

But that doesn't mean I won't do anything!

007 - ♠03

There's this hard object resting in my pocket, and for some time it's been bothering me.

It was the fountain pen, or to be more precise, the trash known as the unusable fountain pen. The ink had long run out, and I was entrusted by my sis to take care of it. Last night, as I didn't want to just toss it on the floor, I brought it to my room, intending to throw it away there. But it seemed I ended up bringing it along with my handkerchief. While it's pretty much useless now, who knows what role it would play as time goes on.

I toyed with the pen by flipping its cap on and off, making a clicking sound as I walked up the stairs. My destination was the Classics Club room on the fourth floor.

Seen from above, Kamiyama High School appears as an H-shape. On one side was the General Block with its regular classrooms, while on the other side would be the Special Block with its arts and science related classrooms. They are joined in the middle by a connecting corridor. When seen from further above, one would see the corridor from the General Block extending towards the Gymnasium.

The Geology Lecture Room, which is used by the Classics Club as their club room, is located in the Special Block. And it's all the way in the corner at the end of the corridor. If Kamiyama High School was the whole world, then this would be its periphery. Normally, we'd curse about how far the club room was while also feeling grateful for how serene it was. Yet with the Cultural Festival upon us, we had to consider another factor, the fact that being located in such a remote corner of the school means we're doubtful of getting any visitors.

In every floor, you would see posters, mascots and advertising boards in all different shades of colour, though that's only up to the third floor. In the fourth floor, all you get is a barren landscape. You won't even see any ads for shopping malls or chain stores. To begin with, there aren't many clubs based up here anyway.

Still, we've put up a few posters in some hard to miss spots promoting the Classics Club, but even that was not enough to enliven the mood of this god-forsaken place. Personally, I prefer this sort of tranquility, but it's troublesome for the Classics Club as an organization, particularly for its president, who sees it as something quite worrying.

I slid open the door of the Geology Room. The girl sitting in the centre of this dreary room stood up upon seeing me enter.

"Good morning, Oreki-san," she said and bowed deeply, her long black hair flowing as she did. This was Chitanda, president of the Classics Club. I reckoned she was probably the first to arrive.

Chitanda Eru is a girl with jet black hair extending all the way to her back as well as pupils of the same colour. Gentle in her demeanor, she was rather tall and well-proportioned for a girl. Her calm way of speaking gives one the impression that she's an elegant lady with a prestigious upbringing. In fact, she is the only daughter of the Chitanda clan, known for being the owners of large tracts of farmland.

However, if you ask me, this elegant Japanese lady image is not Chitanda's true nature.

Amongst her mature features, only her large eyes betray her true character. Possessing a sense of curiosity which has exploded many times before and will continue to explode in the future, this was Chitanda Eru. Ever since I entered school, I and the Classics Club have been involved in many bothersome events thanks to her curiosity. My life motto has always been "If I don't have to do it, I won't. If I have to do it, make it quick." But so far I have been unable to adhere to it, and it's all her fault.

Chitanda lifted her head and made a soft smile. Though she wears her heart on her sleeve, she would rarely express her feelings in an exaggerated way. Rather, she does it in moderation.

"The day has finally arrived."

"So it seems."

"Let's give it our all!"

"Yeah."

I nodded.

Looking at the pile of objects lined up between me and Chitanda, I groaned.

"...You say give it our all, but do you have any idea how we're gonna get this sorted?"

We're talking about none other than the Classics Club essay anthology, "Hyouka." A rather queer name for a title; as for why it had such a queer name, that's a long story. Each volume was bound nicely in a vinyl coating which went through adhesive surface treatment, on its dark brown cover was an illustration of a dog and rabbit biting each other. This cover design was derived from the first ever volume of "Hyouka," which was made in a water-paint style, though this year Ibara decided to draw it in a cute style. Objectively speaking, it didn't look bad at all.

The people working on this anthology included me and Chitanda, and while Satoshi did contribute, he only participated in writing his part of the manuscript. Of course, even after the manuscript was completed, the anthology wouldn't be finished right away. There would still be work involving confirming the number of pages, choosing the right font and paper type, arranging the manuscripts, placing the page numbers, etc, before submitting to the publisher for printing. All that was left to Ibara, who also worked on the other illustrations as well.

While we were consulted on matters concerning the design of the anthology, we were merely confirming Ibara's choices. Seeing how troublesome it looked for her to have to work on so many details, both Chitanda and I had offered to help her many times.

Yet Ibara had turned our offers down, saying she's used to doing such stuff, so it's no big deal to her, and how she can easily handle this amount of work. Besides, she said it would be quite bothersome to teach an amateur from scratch. Hearing her say that, Chitanda decided to relent on helping.

And so, the anthology "Hyouka" is finally complete. In fact, it was a job

well done. Very well done, indeed.

Upon seeing the final product, Ibara went speechless.

When she brought them over to us the day before yesterday, we too became speechless.

...The pile of objects lined up between me and Chitanda were the "Hyouka" anthologies. Rather than "pile," "stack" would be a more appropriate description. Even "mountain" would not sound far-fetched.

Before, we had only planned on making an order to print thirty copies of "Hyouka". Taking one for ourselves, as well as one each for our supervisor and one to keep for archiving, it would leave us with twenty-four left to sell, which was how many we expected to sell.

However, the number of copies somehow ended up being more than we expected.

About seven times more.

I learned that even for a thin anthology like this, two hundred copies of them stacked together was enough to form a "mountain."

To ask us to give our all selling all these is an extremely tall task. Upon hearing my grumble, Chitanda became lost for words as her smile went stiff.

"...Umm, while giving our all may not guarantee everything, I'm sure we'll still achieve something!"

The problem would be how much effort we should be giving then, but...

The door behind us opened; it was Satoshi. Lifting his right arm, he greeted us.

"Hi there, I see you're all worried about our excessive stock!"

Well, so are you.

While still at a loss for words to address the predicament we were in,

Chitanda still bowed deeply like she had to me.

"G-good morning, Fukube-san... How is Mayaka-san?"

"Oh, she said she'll try and come, but she probably won't make it."

"I see...," she muttered regretfully. That was to be expected.

While Chitanda and I aren't affiliated with any other club save the Classics Club, Satoshi has his hands tied with the General Committee and Handicraft Club, while Ibara spends time as a librarian and with the Manga Studies Club. During the Cultural Festival, Satoshi would be busy patrolling the grounds as a member of the General Committee, while I hear Ibara is required to stay with the Manga Club for some time.

"Then, shall we begin?"

Satoshi and I nodded. Looking at us one by one, Chitanda slowly spoke.
"There's not much time until the Opening Ceremony starts... So does anyone have any ideas on how we could sell this many copies of 'Hyouka?'"

The price of "Hyouka" was set at 200 yen.

This was the price decided by Ibara and Chitanda after much calculation. We originally wanted to sell 30 copies at 400 yen each. As we were expecting to sell them all, the proceeds made along with our own club funding would be just enough to cover the printing costs.

But now we have 200 copies of "Hyouka". It's not exactly an extremely tragic mistake, and the printing of excessive copies also meant we actually paid far less for each volume as a result. If we were to sell all 200 volumes, then we could lower the price down to 120 yen per copy and still break even.

But it was impractical to expect all of them to be sold, so taking that into consideration, we settled for 200 yen apiece, though we would need to sell

120 copies in order to break even. Chitanda eventually decided on this price, though selling 120 copies still seems rather optimistic... Still, as I kept quiet, I wasn't planning on complaining afterwards anyway. Surely 200 yen is pretty cheap for an anthology sold at a Cultural Festival, after all.

By the way, even if we were to sell them all, we would not be able to profit from it anyway. As the Kamiyama High School Cultural Festival expressly forbids clubs from profiteering. While I've heard of stories where people would occasionally get away with pocketing 1000 yen for themselves, any amount more than that would end up in the national treasury, sorry, I mean the school treasury.

There are about a thousand students in Kamiyama High School, so in order to break even, we would need to sell to 12% of the student body. In order to sell all copies, we would need to target 20%. This was a pretty difficult task. To use TV ratings as an analogy, even a lay person would know how hard it is for a programme to achieve 20% ratings.

To begin with, our market is not limited to these thousand people. The Kamiyama High School Cultural Festival is free for all, so even regular townspeople would come. As the Cultural Festival takes place from Thursday to Saturday, most visitors would opt to visit on Saturday, the third day. But I have no way of guessing how much they would contribute to the sales.

Besides...

"The problem lies with the Classics Club's name recognition and its poor geographical location."

"Yes, I agree this is the biggest obstacle."

I felt the same way with both of their opinions.

I have already mentioned above about how disadvantageous the Geology Room's location was. For the Classics Club's name recognition, it's even worse. Nearly all of the students in Kami High wouldn't even know of the existence of the Classics Club. In fact, if I hadn't applied to join this year, the club would have been abolished altogether. Unlike the Tea Ceremony

Club, which was known for its open air tea ceremonies, or the A Capella Club renowned for its abilities, who's gonna buy the anthology of a club they've not even heard of?

So there's the location and the name recognition. I spoke up.

"In other words, we will need to find a more conspicuous place to sell, as well as to advertise our club name."

"Well, obviously," Satoshi said teasingly, as though saying we would sell out if we could achieve both. Of course I know that, but it's because we can't achieve them that we're at a loss for what to do.

Meanwhile, Chitanda nodded in admiration.

"Find a new location to sell... And all this time I've been thinking of how to bring customers all the way here. Oreki-san, that's a really innovative idea."

"Erm, it's not exactly innovative..."

"But, will we be able to get permission to move to a new location right away?"

Who knows? That's Satoshi's department, as he's with the General Committee. But he shook his head.

"I'm not really sure. While it may be possible to just move to any space, it depends on whether the Classics Club could be granted such a privilege. So you're gonna have to ask the General Committee president, or even the Student Council president himself."

"Who's the General Committee president?"

"Tanabe-sempai from second year. The General Committee will be holding meetings in the Conference Room from time to time, so you could try dropping by to have a look."

"Why don't you do it?"

Satoshi bit his lip and nodded ambiguously.

"Well, I could do that... But I'm not really confident in conducting such negotiations. Chitanda-san, it might be better for you to start the conversation with them, and for me to assist you by the side."

I see, that could be a good way of doing it. Yet Chitanda looked somehow uneasy. While she might be a forceful lady, like Satoshi, she probably wouldn't be confident making such an unreasonable request either. Yet she could expect no help from me, for I too am bad at those kinds of things.

The situation at present was nothing to be joyful about. Yet Satoshi looked pretty jolly. Well, that's Fukube Satoshi for you, he might even be relishing such hardship. As though bouncing, he spoke.

"Rather than that, I'd prefer to do the advertising."

"Advertising, huh? So how're you gonna do that?"

"Well, that's a secret."

I have a bad feeling about this. I could not think of any secret plan of Satoshi's that could ever work.

"Huh? Do you have a good idea?"

This got Chitanda interested, to which Satoshi puffed his chest.

"There are many competitions and races held during this Cultural Festival, so I was thinking of joining them under the name of the Classics Club. By achieving a good result, we would increase the club's popularity!"

"T-that's a great idea!"

How's that a great idea anyway? I raised my eyebrows as Chitanda was clearly being fooled. Satoshi basically *wanted* to participate in all these competitions and races himself. To begin with, it'll still be Satoshi participating, it's just that the entry name will be that of the Classics Club instead.

But still, it's not a bad method, as we haven't got any other way of advertising our club. It was possible it could actually turn out quite well.

I looked at the clock and said, "So it's roughly decided then? Chitanda will go and request a new selling location, and Satoshi will do the advertising."

"Yes, so we had better make our way now. But what will you do, Oreki-san?"

Me?

Actually, I had a plan. A plan to contribute greatly to the selling of "Hyouka," as well as stay true to my creed.

I cleared my throat and said solemnly, "I will..."

"Yes?"

"Stay and watch the stall."

Chitanda blinked her eyes while Satoshi muttered as though realizing something.

"...In-indeed, or else there won't be anyone left behind."

"Yes, you're right. We would need someone to watch the stall."

Now how's that? No complaints at all.

"Well, now that things are decided, we should get going. We don't have much time," I said while looking at the clock on the wall.

There were only ten minutes left before the Opening Ceremony begins. Even the Cultural Festival and Sports Day were not exempted from attendance taking, but taking into consideration that students would be scattered in their clubrooms overseeing their exhibits, attendance would be taken during the morning assembly every day. In other words, we'll be counted as late if we don't get to the Opening Ceremony on time.

Nodding greatly, Chitanda cleared her throat. Taking a deep breath, she said in one go, "Then let us proceed with our allotted tasks. We should try to sell as many volumes as possible. Our target is to sell all 200 copies of 'Hyouka'! Let's give it our all!"

...Well, let's just say I wasn't even thinking of whether we could sell all 200 copies.

[**200 COPIES REMAINING**]

008 - ♥02

About a thousand students were packed within the dark gymnasium, which had its windows covered by curtains, and due to today being a rather hot October day, the gymnasium ended up being stuffy. Inside the gymnasium was a light that shines onto the stage, but even now that light was turned off, so it was pitch black inside. But it only lasted for a moment, for in the next moment a spotlight shone on a male student; it was the Student Council president. He was a rather tall and intrepid looking person who was said to speak eloquently as befitting of a Student Council president.

The president walked towards the mic and looked around the hall as he took a deep breath. He then declared loudly, omitting any prefix altogether, "I declare the 42nd Kanya Festival open!"

As the voice from deep within his abdomen flowed out, the thousand Kami High students instantly burst into an uproar. The Kamiyama High School Cultural Festival opening ceremony had begun.

According to the "Kanya Festival Guide" published by the General Committee, the Breakdancing Club will lead the opening ceremony with their performance. I'm ashamed to admit that I've not seen people perform breakdancing before. While I know it has something to do with dancing, I don't exactly know how dances can be broken. I wonder if it has something to do with the performers breaking something on the stage?

As red, yellow, blue and green lights shone on the stage, the bewildering performance had begun. I looked up wondering where the lights shone from, and saw people busy moving the lighting equipment around in the catwalk above the stage. It probably takes lots of practice to be able to move such lights so quickly in an orderly pattern. If I get the chance, I must inquire how they mastered this pattern.

Smoke was emitted from behind the stage as the rumble briefly quieted down. As the smoke dispersed, two people from each side came flying from left and right, and at the same time booming background music was played.

It was a vibrating electronic sound. I wonder if the image it conveys was that of space? In tune with the music, four people began dancing.

So this is breakdancing? The dancers looked as though they were turning a key in a doorknob, and they swung their arms and kicked their legs as though swimming in breast stroke. Dancing in a variety of moves, they looked very active indeed. Would it be rude to call them non-human? As their inorganic dance moves looked really fascinating.

Oh! They jumped!

Oh! They spun!

Oh! They stood on their hands!

This time they begun spinning around while standing on their hands. But would they be fine with all the heat caused by the friction of their heads rubbing against the ground? Wouldn't their hair be scratched off from too much rubbing? I'm curious about it.

The dance then stepped up its tempo, becoming faster and faster; I could no longer tell how they moved their arms and legs. This is amazing. The music also went into full burst... Umm, this loud sound is starting to hurt my ears. I'm not that good with loud sounds.

Before long, as the cocktail of spotlights converged in the centre of the stage, the four dancers stopped in perfect stillness just as the music ended. The crowd gave a loud response; I too gave the Breakdancing Club my overwhelming approval.

The second song began playing, which was in the rhythm of some African-like folk music. It was quite different from the previous song. I was quite curious as to how they would dance to that tune. Besides, I would also be interested in watching the performance of the Rakugo Club afterwards... No, I mustn't be tempted.

Having come to my senses, I noticed quite a number of students trickling out of the hall. They're probably in charge of watching their stalls or

preparing for their club events. Without disturbing the performance of the Breakdancing Club, I too quietly left the hall.

I hurried down the corridor, walking in longer strides than I normally do. I saw some students decorating their classroom door with gold and silver paper while there doesn't seem to be much time left. I wonder what club they're from? They looked so frantic that I feel like helping them. No, I mustn't! The Classics Club itself is in a grave situation.

As I pondered how to say my lines, I reached the Conference Room. According to the "Kanya Festival Guide," the General Committee seems to be based here.

The Conference Room is situated on the second floor of the General Block. As the Gymnasium is directly connected to the General Block, it wasn't a long walk at all. So before long, here I was before the Conference Room. It was like any other classroom, save that it had a sign pasted on its sliding door that read "General Committee Room." I knocked on the door.

"....."

Huh?

"Is anybody in?"

There was no response. I tried opening the door, but it was locked.

Yes, now that I think about it, as I had left midway through the Opening Ceremony, it was not strange that no one from the General Committee had yet returned. It seems like I came too early.

Somehow, I became a bit anxious as I didn't want to waste any time. In such a situation, I should do some deep breathing. So I inhaled deeply and breathed out slowly. One more time, breathe in, breathe out.

I looked around me, there didn't seem to be anyone from the General Committee coming this way.

On the notice board beside the door was a catchy Cultural Festival promotion poster. I've seen many other Cultural Festival posters within the school grounds and around the neighbourhood, but this was the first time I'd seen this one. It was drawn in a manga-like style which Mayaka-san might be familiar with. It showed two students, a boy and girl preparing for the Cultural Festival. The characters looked cute while the clothes they wore looked real, one could feel the amazing originality effusing from it.

If there was one complaint to make, it would be its title, "The 42nd Kanya Festival." Its official name ought to be the Kamiyama High School Cultural Festival, as "Kanya Festival" doesn't really evoke a good meaning. As for why, it's rather difficult to explain. On the corner of the poster were written the words "Student Council Executive Committee." Since it's a poster made by the Executive Committee, I feel they ought to avoid using the name "Kanya Festival."

I moved my eyes away from the poster and looked around me once more, but there still wasn't anyone coming. Oh dear, this doesn't look good. Should I just keep waiting here? But we haven't got much time.

No, in such times, I should calm myself down. I once again took a deep breath, breathe in, breathe out... Okay, one more time...

"...Can I help you?"

"Wah!"

As I had just inhaled a deep breath, I couldn't help but let out a yelp. As I was startled, I couldn't suppress such a strange sound. I tried to wave my arms to explain that I wasn't particularly doing anything suspicious.

I bowed my head to the person that called out to me and said, "Good morning. Are you President Tanabe of the General Committee?"

I've seen this person before in the Wall Newspaper Club's "Kami High Monthly," so he was definitely President Tanabe of the General Committee.

Wearing small framed glasses on his oval face, his short and neatly cut hair gave the image of an earnest-looking person. Tanabe-san looked a bit taken aback before politely greeting me in return.

"Oh, good morning. Yes, I'm Tanabe... Can I help you?"

"Yes,"

I nodded and uttered the lines that I'd practiced many times beforehand.

"Please allocate a new stall for the Classics Club."

"...Huh?"

Tanabe-san's eyes went round. Oh no, I neglected my manners. Paying attention to my manners, I repeated my request.

"I'm sorry, I forgot to introduce myself. I'm the president of the Classics Club, Chitanda Eru of Class 1-A. We have come here with a request; we would like you to please allocate a new stall for the Classics Club."

Tanabe-san raised his eyebrows as his face looked really troubled. Uneasily, he spoke.

"I don't really understand what's going on but..."

He looked as though he was about to say something difficult.

"As we've already decided on how to run most of the stuff during the Kanya Festival, for you to suddenly come and request a new stall would be a bit difficult."

"...So you aren't able to do it?"

"I'm sorry."

I see. It may be troubling, but it can't be helped if it can't be done. I'm very sorry, Mayaka-san, Fukube-san, Oreki-san. Chitanda Eru was not able to accomplish her task.

I see, thank you for your information. I had wanted to give my regards

properly, but I ended up speaking those words softly instead. As I proceeded to leave and ponder what to do next, Tanabe-san called out to me.

"No, wait. That's just the normal procedures anyway. If you have some extenuating circumstance, then we could listen to what you have to say, but I can't promise whether we could grant you your request."

Circumstance.

...Now that I think about it, I've completely neglected to explain my situation. Oreki-san has constantly told me off for my bad habit of skipping straight to the main point without explaining myself properly. I never realized this before... but it seemed like it is indeed true. I must be careful next time.

Anyway, I should not put Tanabe-san's good will to waste. I turned around and stood before him.

I then began to explain my story.

In great detail.

We were supposed to make an order to print 30 copies, but ended up with 200 copies. To begin with, this was not Mayaka-san's fault, as I too had a look at the order sheet, and Mayaka-san also made sure to correctly place the order for 30 copies. However, at the same time, she also made another request to print 200 copies for her own anthology. As to why she would make such a request, I did not know. But the problem arose when it turned out that the publisher had mixed up the order for "Hyouka" and her own anthology. Mayaka-san blamed herself for not double-checking enough, but nobody could have foreseen such an error.

I told Tanabe-san the entire process as well. I wasn't able to keep the story brief, but all this time Tanabe-san simply stood and listened.

"That sure sounds tough."

After much thought, he said prudently, "200 copies huh? Not even the

Manga Club could sell that much. I understand the desire to seek a new stall in order to sell more copies, and I would really like to help... But any other club could have faced such a situation, so it's just not possible for us to give the Classics Club a special dispensation, you know?"

Indeed, it would not be just the Classics Club that would encounter such a situation, I had known that fact beforehand but...

"So, it's not possible?"

Tanabe-san nodded softly... "I'm sorry."

But this time, after giving my regards and turning to leave, Tanabe-san uttered some advice from behind.

"But you know, if you were to entrust other clubs to sell your anthologies on your behalf at their stalls, that we don't really mind."

I- I see, I never knew such a method existed! How could I not have thought of this before? Indeed, if we were to place our anthologies at existing stalls, it would not be counted as the Classics Club receiving special treatment.

"That's a brilliant idea."

Without realizing, I became relieved.

"Thank you very much. I will consider it!"

I said and bowed deeply.

...Come to think of it, back at the Geology Room, Fukube-san had promised to accompany me to the General Committee and help me out in our request. I wonder whatever happened to him?

009 - ♣03

Hahahahahaha.

Oh, oh boy. This is too hilarious, I just can't withhold my laughter. My rationality tells me this joke is rather silly, but I still ended up laughing loudly. I think I could go on all day.

I knew the two fellows on stage, they were from the Rakugo Study Club. (Speaking of which, its name is merely an official front, as rather than the study of Rakugo, the Kamiyama High School Rakugo Study Club was more focused on Manzai[10] and stand-up comedy. I have no idea if there are any clubs that actually studied the art of Rakugo.

"Wow, it's sure been a long time since we've had a sushi dinner in a tatami room. We've spent quite some time there, we'd better get home quick, or we'll be late.

"'Kay."

"By the way, I don't mind giving you a ride, but when are you gonna to get off? Ever since I started driving, you've been giggling while looking at me all this time."

"You know, you've got quite a huge *johnny*..."

"Yeah yeah yeah, look I'm really worried about you. We'd better get you home quick... What're you grinning at?"

"Heh heh, and then?"

"You know, you were sobbing and giggling while saying 'My leg's gone limp, you think I'm able to step on the brakes?' It'd be dangerous for you to drive, no?"

"I guess."

"Oh dear, I've stepped on the accelerator by mistake."

"*You're* the one driving dangerously!"

Hahahahahaha.

010 - ♦02

I left the gymnasium as soon as the Opening Ceremony entered into intermission once the breakdancing performance was over. Before exiting, I turned to look back at the dark and stuffy gymnasium, and saw only half the students had remained behind.

To be honest, I feel like joining up with the others at the Classics Club. It was a failure for me to not double check with the publisher, so I feel like I have to take responsibility. On the other hand, I also realized it was also partly due to me not wanting to go to the Manga club.

It's not like I dislike the Manga Club. Though my expectations of the Manga Studies Club were different from before I entered school, I like the Manga Club the way it is now. Since manga is something you ought to like from the bottom of your heart. However, just because people with the same interest are gathered together does not mean there will be no friction between them.

...This heavy feeling I've been having since the start isn't so good. I'm probably the glass half-empty type of person. I'm supposed to be enjoying the privilege granted to me by the Cultural Festival of wearing this cardigan and brocade trousers within the school premises.

The Manga Club room is located in Preparation Room No. 1 on the second floor of the General Block. Compared to the Geology Room of the Classics Club, its location was a blessing as it's right next to the regular classrooms. Outside on the corridor was a non-flashy signboard that read "Manga Study Club". It was designed by our president Yuasa Naoko-sempai.

The sliding door was left open as we were soon to expect customers coming in to visit our stall.

"Good morning."

Not wanting to sound too much like Chi-chan's polite way of greeting people, I tend to pronounce it as "Good MORNing." It's not exactly special

or anything like that, only that I've yet to see anyone pronounce it that way in mangas and novels.

"Oh, Ibara, you came."

Greeting me open-heartedly was Kouchi Ayako-sempai from second year. Not only is she very active and knowledgeable, her works are also of a high level, thus making her a central figure within the Manga Club. It was she who suggested that the Manga Club should randomly pick members to cosplay. Since she was the one who proposed it, she too was cosplaying today.

Her Chinese-style costume was probably self-made. It was neither a cheongsam[11] nor a Mao suit[12], but more like that of a Taoist priest. She wore fluffy-looking purple trousers and a gown with long yellow sleeves flowing all the way down to the floor. The sleeves were cut from the sides, allowing the arms to come out from within. The gown she wore was generally red in colour, though the colour around the chest area was slightly different. An original Chinese gown like that would have been more fluffy, so this was simply an imitation. On her head was a wide hat, from which a talisman hung in front, covering her right eye. Wrapped around her body was a yellow sash, though it's probably made of a large ribbon. As Kouchi-sempai had short-hair to begin with, her sharp gaze and average build means she looked just right for this character.

"Is that a Jiangshi[13]?"

"Officially, it should be called a Chinese Ghost."

Kouchi-sempai examined my costume from top to bottom, and upon seeing my feet clad in the usual indoor shoes used within the school premises said, "You need to put more effort into the shoes."

And suddenly the conversation shifted towards me. Though I didn't intend to wear this costume just to look nice, I didn't want her of all people to tell me that. For a moment, the atmosphere became tense... Since I was the only one who resisted doing any cosplay towards the bitter end.

"Oh, good morning," a voice called out from beside us; it was President

Yuasa.

Rather than a costume, the president was dressed in Kamiyama High School's sailor school uniform. It was only intended for the five members in charge of the clubroom stall to cosplay to begin with, and the president was not one of them. Even though I was the only one who didn't cosplay properly, I could sense President Yuasa's generosity due to her being an open-minded person. To put it another way, from time to time she could be an easy to read person, a bit like watching a cat sitting on a porch. On her soft face were two big eyes with double-eyelids. Taking a look at my costume, she said, "Did you spend a lot making that?"

"No, I only paid for the belt, that's all."

"Do make sure to send us the receipt so you can claim your expense."

"Oh, it's okay, I'm fine with it."

Our president laughed gently, but I just could not bring myself to use the club's funds. While it was much more than what the Classics Club had, it wasn't exactly abundant.

Actually there was still some time before customers would arrive. I was looking around the First Preparation Room, in which the desks were lined up in a C-shape. The Manga Club's showpiece is "Zeamis[14]," the manga review anthology of 100 manga titles past and present. As for why it's called "Zeamis," I was told it was because last year it was called "Kanamis[15]". As for why it was called "Kanamis" last year, I didn't bother to ask as it sounded too silly. Besides that, members can bring their own published work, which will be distributed for free here to be sold as well. If they're going to sell these for money, they should have just set up a doujinshi stall to being with.

"Hey."

"Mornin'."

As time passed, more and more Manga Club members showed up.

It seems there were some members who were cosplaying despite not being

required to help out. As we had twenty or so members, it was natural that cliques would be formed.

The first would be the boys. I don't know about the other clubs, but the boys actually form a minority in the Kami High Manga Club. As a result, they would gravitate towards people who were like them in order to figure out what they should be doing. They're generally harmless.

The other group was centred around Kouchi-sempai. While not particularly numerous, their outspokenness means they're considered the mainstream faction. The cosplaying members gathered around Kouchi-sempai, the proponent of the idea, to discuss how to greet the customers, and sometimes, the sound of some war cry could be heard.

"Alright! Let's get this going!"

Something like that.

And then there's the third group, which somehow could not bring themselves to follow Kouchi-sempai. It may be because they aren't fond of her boisterous nature, or they felt her actions don't match her words. And for some reason, this group...

"Hey, Mayaka, what's with that costume?"

"Mayaka, do I just leave the change here?"

"...Man, wonder when this will end?"

Was centred around me.

As for why, it was because it seemed like I was the only one who had spoken out against Kouchi-sempai.

The atmosphere was not exactly strained, neither was it explosive. Everyone is here due to their love of manga. Yet, in all this time, I didn't feel like coming to the Manga Club. The least I could do for the Classics Club was to at least request that the Manga Club sell "Hyouka" on behalf of the Classics Club. If "Hyouka" could be sold at the Manga Club, then

considering the Manga Club's name recognition, we might sell around 20 copies. Right now it's a bit hard due to the atmosphere, so I was hoping the mood would change for the better, as soon as possible.

I wonder what Fuku-chan and the others at the Classics Club are doing now? I wonder who's watching the stall?

...Argh, I didn't even think about who should watch the stall!

No one would want to buy from such a neglectful club.

"Umm, are you guys open?"

A voice called out. Standing at the open entrance were two male students. Making a business-like smile, I stood up diligently and said with excessive enthusiasm, "Yes, welcome! Congratulations on becoming our first customer!"

011 - ♠04

It was just as I had expected, there was nobody coming to the Geology Room.

It's so quiet, so peaceful, so idle. All that could be heard was the remnant of some sort of commotion emanating from the central courtyard towards the General Block. This is excellent, long live being the stall keeper.

….. I shut my eyes and open them again, and saw a brownish "mountain" before me. This must be an illusion. In order to maintain the tranquility within my heart, I thought it best to keep my eyes shut again.

Of course, I had no intention of having to personally clear this mountain away. Within "Hyouka" was a manuscript written by me. For some reason, as it was none other than me that managed to compile all the clues with regards to the "Hyouka" incident, it was decided that I would contribute the bulk of the column space concerning that.

As a result of no one knowing exactly what the Classics Club does, the contents of "Hyouka" ended up being quite disorderly. You don't even need to open it to figure out what's inside. Chitanda and I contributed to writing about the "Hyouka" incident, Ibara wrote something about some manga that she respected, while Satoshi's column was about some joke concerning a classical paradox.

As it was something that had to be done, it was natural for me to want to finish it quickly, but it doesn't exactly mean I haven't got any attachment for the anthology that I wrote. If possible, I'd rather not want to throw all these 200 copies away as some bothersome trash once the Cultural Festival ends.

Even if I were to ignore my attachment, upon looking at the mountain of eccentric anthologies I thought of how Chitanda and Ibara would react if they saw those turn to trash, I couldn't help but feel depressed about it.

That's why I have expectations for Chitanda and Satoshi on their endeavors. If they could somehow think up of some amazing publicity campaign which I could not think of, I wouldn't exactly begrudge them if it meant the chaotic inflow of customers disrupting my peaceful task of watching over the stall as a result.

Which was why I decided to indulge in my moment of peace for the time being. I allowed my body to relax, feeling at ease as I shut my eyes and bob my head as I give in to my drowsiness and bent myself over the table.

The sound of music could be heard.

It was a rich harmonious tune.

Compared to the techno and tribal music of the Breakdancing Club, I much prefer this A Capella music. This means the music was being sung by the A Capella Club at the central courtyard. I gently sat upright and leaned towards the window. Perhaps they were used to singing like that, as their first harmony was enough to attract students coming to watch from various windows around the school building.

There were five students in uniform lined up in a row. One of them stepped forward and looked around the central courtyard, bowing towards us who have come to watch them from our windows. This was followed by the sound of people clapping their hands as he returned to the column and resumed singing.

So that was just a rehearsal just now, huh? When I first heard their music, it felt quite soothing to the year, enough to "make a lion sleep".

Yawn.

….. Man, as expected of them with their amazing singing. My already sleepy body was slowly being hypnotized by their gentle music, which sounded like a lullaby.....

Leaning by the window sill, I struggled to stay awake, just when I thought it wouldn't be bad to just fall asleep here, the song had ended. Another round of applause emanated from the General and Special Blocks. I opened my eyes and clapped my hands as well. One of the A Capella Club members came forward to bow again before joining his club members towards a cooler box besides them, which was opened by another member. I couldn't see quite clearly from here, but it looked like they were drinking some bottled drinks. No doubt they were refreshing themselves between each song.

" .....?"

Hmm?

Some sort of commotion was stirring amongst the A Capella Club members. They were pointing at the cooler box and shouting something repeatedly. They shook their heads and looked into the cooler box suspiciously. Has something happened?

At any rate, looks like they wouldn't be singing their second song anytime soon, it was pointless to look any further. So I moved away from the window and back towards my seat, yawning as I began waiting for visitors again.

Amidst my yawning, I could feel my jaw aching.

Someone appeared outside the opened door. Whoa, now that's some visitor we have here. He wore a tattered shirt which was held together by safety pins and had silver accessories all over his fingers and head. It was a punk. For some reason his eyes looked hesitant, I wonder what he came here for.

As I looked on suspiciously, the punk asked reservedly, "Umm, so what's being set up here?"

"This? ...Oh, we're selling an anthology."

"Anthology?"

The punk moved his eyes towards the mountain of "Hyouka." It was only now that he noticed this brownish mountain of anthologies stacked up.

"Sure is some amazing amount you're selling here."

"...It's a long story, we didn't exactly plan on selling this many."

"I'll have one then."

Whoa, a customer! My manners, I'd better put up some manners.

"That'll be 200 yen please."

Darn, I'm not looking courteous at all. This is asking too much of me.

The punk didn't seem to mind that though, and took out his wallet. For some reason he lowered his head as though looking apologetic as he received the copy of "Hyouka" from me. Maybe he was just killing time walking around? Just when I was thinking that, he suddenly changed his demeanor.

"Hey, w-what is this!?"

Huh? Wha-? Is there a cockroach inside your "Hyouka?"

Instead, the punk was looking at the piece of trash I placed beside the mountain of "Hyouka" copies, the broken fountain pen. As though finding a piece of treasure, he picked it up and looked at it reverently.

"Yes, this! This should do!"

He suddenly became delighted, while I could only look on with indifference.

Forgetting my attempt to look polite, I asked him bluntly, "Is something special about that piece of trash?"

"Huh? Oh, I'm sorry."

The punk returned to his senses.

"I'm with the Fashion Study Club, so we do fashion design, you see? And I've sort of forgotten to bring some chest pocket accessory for my formal costume. While a white handkerchief would normally suffice, it'll just look too normal. But I'm running out of time, so I was walking around wondering what to do. So, here, what do you think of sticking it in my chest pocket? Looks good, doesn't it?"

The punk grinned while fondling and examining the fountain pen. Well, if he likes it so much, this piece of trash perhaps does have its use after all.

"You can have it."

"R-really?"

As he said this, he searched for something in his pockets.

"Then, here, you can have this in return."

He took out a badge from his pocket. Rather than a badge, it looked more like a plastic numbered tag with a safety pin behind it. A simple design.

While I was wondering what this was, the punk pointed to it and said, "That's a VIP badge for our fashion show. Just bring that and come to the Fashion Room if you're interested. Don't worry, we'll take care of coordinating your costume. Though we call it a fashion show, you don't need to do any special catwalk moves. So anyway, see ya."

He said it as though he was escaping. Even if you didn't say it so frantically, I wasn't planning on replying. Then again, even if he's in such a hurry, would that costume of his even be considered formal?

I held the badge in my hand and put together what the punk had said so far. Basically, if I take this and go to the Fashion Study Club's stage, they'll make me into a model.

Nope, not interested. I placed it on the middle of the table.

...Anyway, he was our cherished first customer after all. In light of events, each of us Classics Club members took two copies each, plus one copy for our supervising teacher and one copy to preserve, which makes ten copies. So this means we now have 189 copies remaining.

Some progress that was. Feeling satisfied, I opened my mouth and yawned again as the A Capella Club resumed singing again. This time they were singing some up-tempo pop song. Hmm, this time it won't be a lullaby, huh?

[**189 COPIES REMAINING**]

012 - ♥03

No matter which of the six songs they sang, the A Capella Club was just amazing. They were so good that I clapped my hands so hard that they were hurting.

There was no doubt that choosing to sing in the central courtyard allowed their wonderful voices to reverberate across the school grounds. Perhaps they were rehearsing in different places beforehand to find out which place had the best acoustics? I feel a bit curious about it.

Feeling satisfied, I moved away from the window. It was then that I realized something and looked at my wristwatch.

...Eh?

Oh no, is it this late already? It's nearly noon! How did time pass so quickly? I must really stop getting distracted by whatever thing attracts my interest, or I won't be able to finish my task.

Hardening my resolve, I walked away from the window.

Looking back towards the corridor, I saw a strange sign curtain for the Charms Association, the signboard for the Handicraft Club which Fukube-san had put some effort into making, and a rather interesting poster of a composite photo by the Photography Club.....

Are there any glasses which would allow me to only see what's ahead and not get distracted!?

2.2 - Quiz Trial

013 - ♣04

The Quiz Trial held by the Kamiyama High School Quiz Study Club... That's like the biggest quiz tournament in Kamiyama City!

This is because I've yet to hear of any other quiz tournament being held elsewhere in this city.

To me, this Quiz Trial would be the highlight for Day 1. There's nothing bigger than this, no one else's database is more real than mine!

But I'm still surprised by this, as I never expected this many people to turn up; there's like 200 people here. While I could see quite a few outsiders amongst the participants, the majority were still Kami High students. So that's nearly 20% of the student body! Man, I'm envious, if only the Handicraft Club and Classics Club could each summon 100 people like that, we could have sold the anthology in no time.

In one corner of the school ground before the podium, I could hear all sorts of mutterings.

"...If it's over how about we go see the Brass Band?..."

"...What about the Movie Study Club? You don't need to be a movie buff in order to watch their show, but..."

"...Really? Hahaha, now that's kind of mean..."

"...But don't you think it sounds kind of ridiculous...?"

To begin with, while I had already imagined a lot of people participating, not even I, who had been looking forward to this since last night, could envision 200 people coming. Such was the effect of their publicity campaign.

It was just past 12:30 when the school PA broadcast went on air. It was the Broadcasting Club's pseudo radio broadcast. With relaxing pop music being played in the background, the broadcast was used to relay the latest hot topics during the Kamiyama High School Cultural Festival to the listeners. About 15 minutes had passed when the broadcast went to interview the president of the Quiz Club, which went as follows:

"This year will be our 7th tournament. As usual we are offering very interesting prizes, but this time we've prepared questions that not just people who are good at quiz shows could answer. Naturally speaking, members of the Quiz Club are forbidden from participating, so we believe this is a golden opportunity for these people. So we welcome all to participate... Basically, we'll be holding a true and false questions preliminary involving participants running between circles with each answer on the school grounds. It'll be some great exercise after lunch, no?"

He sure knows how to stir up the event. By advertising via a radio broadcast, I thought they could achieve a moderate success, but I was mistaken. Not counting the audience, there were already 200 participants. (This was just a guesstimate amount of course, as I have no idea exactly how many there were. Still, it was definitely more than a hundred people.)

And I must also mention that the Quiz Club had also gotten themselves mentioned by the Wall Newspaper Club. During the Cultural Festival, the Wall Newspaper Club publishes a Special Edition every two hours. And within the Day 1 12pm edition it was mentioned that the Quiz Club activity today sounds interesting. By pasting these Special Edition copies around the school's notice board, even a fool would be aware of their activity.

It seems the Classics Club would need the assistance of both the Broadcasting Club and Wall Newspaper Club if it is to achieve its objective. I must inform Chitanda-san of this later.

Anyway, that's for me to worry about after the Trial. For now, I must focus on this Quiz Trial, as it's crucial for me to get as high a ranking as possible, since I'm not participating in my favourite event in a personal capacity, but on behalf of the Classics Club. No offense to the others, but the only one in the club capable of winning this would be me. So this would not be an easy task.

The Quiz Club president walked up to the podium. It wasn't someone I knew. If it was a Kamiyama High School student that I knew, then he or she would have to be someone really special or eccentric. In his hand he carried a mic. A short static noise ensued as he tapped the mic and proceeded to speak.

"Welcome to the Quiz Trial. To be honest, we're surprised by the number of participants we have today. This year will be our 7th Quiz Trial, and it is the largest ever held so far..." Blah, blah, blah, followed by, "Now let the tournament begin. First we will have the true and false questions preliminaries. On your left is the true box with a circle, while on your right is the false box with a cross. One of our members will hold up a placard with a question, and you must figure out whether it is true or false, and only those who answer correctly will advance. The preliminaries will continue until only five contestants remain. You have 15 seconds for each question. Now then, may the 7th Quiz Trial begin!"

As he finished, one of the female Quiz Club members stepped up onto the podium and received the mic from the president who stepped down. I was a bit relieved, as this president's words were rather unintelligible to the ears.

The girl took the mic and looked at the cue card in one of her hands and said clearly, "Question 1! If 'diamond' in Japanese is 'kongouseki' (diamond stone), then 'emerald' would be 'ryokuchuugyoku' (green pillar jade). True or false?"

Hmm, now how should I answer this?

Of course it's true. (Since unlike beryl, the chemical composition of emerald does not contain aquamarine, or it would be called 'ryokuchuuseki' (green pillar stone) instead!)

Now that I think about it, this place is quite deserted.

The reason I felt that way was because I knew what a real doujinshi festival was like. This was not a doujinshi festival, but a school cultural festival. We're not going to get people interested in manga and anime flocking here. This reminds me of coming here last year before with Fuku-chan back when we were in junior high... and I certainly don't recall that many people coming then either. When I discovered that treasure, I hardly noticed any people around me.

But it's true that there were many club members here with too much time to spare. So free they were that the atmosphere felt a bit strained... As a result, I have yet to request them to sell our anthologies.

As the current batch of customers left, the room went quiet, and we could hear a speaker blaring out loud from afar. As this room is situated in the General Block while the central courtyard was adjacent to the Special Block, it was hard to hear what was going on over there.

"Mayaka, what's up?" the girl sitting next to me asked.

"Nothing, just wondering what's going on in the courtyard."

"Oh, that's probably the Quiz Club."

It was then that I remembered there was a radio broadcast mentioning about it. A quiz tournament, huh? If that's the case, then Fuku-chan would definitely join in. Listening intently, I could make out the question being asked via the speakers.

"...Next question! The Japanese word "darui" is derived from the English word "dull." True or false?"

Eh?

I didn't even have time to think. Stop asking such silly questions! But if it's true or false questions, then it's probably used to filter out a large number of

contestants. So while I was a bit depressed that I didn't know the answer to that question, I guess I was also relieved at not having to answer.
The girl next to me also listened in.

She smiled and asked me, "So, what do you think?"

"Hmm,"

I know "saboru" came from "sabotage," so "darui" is probably the same, as it didn't feel strange to me.

So I said softly, "True, I guess?"

015 - ♣05

As the 15 second time limit passed, a rope was raised surrounding the contestants choosing the "True" and "False" circles. Looking around me, five had chosen "True" while four chose "False." As a preliminary, this would probably be the final round.

"The answer is..... "

The announcer held back her voice in order to raise the suspense.

" ....."

You're overdoing this already.

" .....FALSE! This ends the preliminaries!"

YES! (Actually, I did not really know what the etymology of the word "darui" was, but I do know that if it can be written in kanji 怠い then it's most likely not a foreign loan-word.) The announcer, who upped her tempo of suspense for every question answered, now waved her arms as though dancing and pointed towards us.

"Congratulations to the four who have chosen 'False' for passing the preliminaries! Please proceed toward the podium for the finals."

Aha, here comes my chance to appeal to the crowd. That's what I'm here for. As I walked toward the podium, someone tapped me on the shoulder from behind.

"Yo, Fukube, so you're through as well, huh?

The person who said that was...

...Just hang on a minute, I'm trying to remember his name. I know this guy, honest. For the moment being I'll try replying.

"Of course."

"You don't remember who I am, do you?"

"Haha, guess I was too focused on the quizzes."

Who was he? I know he's a classmate though.

He wasn't from the General Committee nor the Handicraft Club, so he could only be from my class. The only person I could think of who could stand out from my class was Juumonji-san.

No, wait, I remember. I'm sure of it. I've not completely forsaken my ability to remember names.

"So, how's the Go Club, Tani-kun?"

Tani Koreyuki, besides being a member of the Go Club, he was also unique in having a hard to spell name. We would occasionally have small chats like these in class, though I wasn't particularly that close to him, so he could be counted as one of my "acquaintances." Now that I see his face again, he had quite a firm jaw and a rather round nose. But as he didn't leave much of an impression on me besides those, it means his actions until now were nothing out of the ordinary.

I have more interest in people who surprise me. Chitanda-san interests me somewhat, and Houtarou has been surprising me a lot ever since we entered Kami High. As for people who aren't surprising, unless they have interesting features of club activities, I would barely struggle to remember their names.

Yet here was Tani-kun passing the Quiz Trial preliminaries. And those weren't easy questions either. I see now, Tani-kun, my impression of you as a normal person may not be correct. He was here due to possessing either a great amount of knowledge or luck.

Tani-kun showed no attempt to hide his elation.

"The Go Club? I do have something interesting to tell you, wanna hear?"

Something interesting, huh? If it's something that's changed my impression

of Tani-kun, it would be that he's never told me something interesting before, as it did not appeal to me.

"Please step forward to the podium!"

The announcer repeated. Oh yes, my chance at making an appeal. I waved the palm of my hand to gesture to Tani-kun to move to the podium.

On the podium were three guys and one girl. I took a quick glance at them; besides Tani-kun, I didn't know any of them. Had they been the "Empress" Irisu Fuyumi-sempai, President Tanabe Jirou-sempai of the General Committee, or the "New Master of the Library" Juumonji Kaho-san, then I would have to hold my hands up in resignation. While I'm confident that my knowledge is as good as theirs, I just can't feel like beating them. That said, I don't think my database would accept such a fact.

The announcer had interviewed and asked the names for three of the contestants already, including Tani-kun. And now it was my turn. The announcer held up her mic and smiled.

"Okay, our fourth finalist! May we have your class and name please?"

I cleared my throat in order to address the 200 participants as well as the hundreds more listening via the speakers,

"I'm Fukube Satoshi of the Classics Club."

"Huh?"

"The Classics Club, as in classical literature."

The announcer looked confused for a moment. She didn't look the type to know how to deal with unexpected events.

She soon nodded deeply and said, "I see! I never knew we had such a club. Guess we have all sorts of strange clubs, right?"

So far so good. I paid attention not to rush myself and allowed the words to come out naturally. Even without being requested to, I was generally good at saying what I wanted to say.

"Though we call ourselves the Classics Club, we don't exactly cover classic literature like 'Tsurezuregusa[16].' To be honest, not even I knew what it is that we do exactly, so it's kind of strange. After all, this was a club that came back from the jaws of abolition as it didn't have any members prior to us joining. You could say we're a club that publishes anthologies. So we've published one, you see. And it's an amazing anthology, since we put a lot of effort into it..."

016 - ♠05

"...we put a lot of effort into it..."

Yeah, sure we have.

In terms of quantity.

[185 COPIES REMAINING]

"At any rate, we've managed to solve a great mystery concerning the Kanya Festival."

"Oh, really? And that is?"

Her interest didn't seem to be faked. This was to be expected, as it would be easy to hook them in if I tell them "there's knowledge not even the Quiz Club is aware of." (No, I wasn't intending to make fun of the Quiz Club here. Since I myself am a natural candidate as a Quiz Club member myself, but I just ended up using them as an example.) Feeling confident, I raised my voice.

"And it's none other than the origin of the name of the Kanya Festival. I'll say it here, it is NOT an abbreviation of the 'Kamiyama High School Cultural Festival.' The Classics Club have discovered the real answer to that."

"Really? And that is?"
"Well..."

I teased a bit.

"Obviously, that's a secret. However, we'll be in trouble if no one buys our anthology. So for only 200 yen, which is a great bargain, you can discover the 33-year-old secret of the Kamiyama High School Cultural Festival! It's all recorded in our essay anthology 'Hyouka'! Now on sale at the Geology Room on the fourth floor of the Special Block with rave reviews!"

I glared at the crowd while pumping my right fist in the air.

I wonder if I overdid this? For a moment, an uneasiness crept through me...

A roar of applause thundered across the court. Just like how I felt in the Opening Ceremony, everyone was particularly receptive to the festive atmosphere. My gamble had worked, the appeal was a success!

Remaining in my victory pose, I felt like crying.

It no longer mattered whether I won this quiz tournament anymore.

018 - ♥04

"Now on sale at the Geology Room on the fourth floor of the Special Block with rave reviews!"

Ehh? We're getting rave reviews already?

I-I didn't even know.

This is fantastic. I have hope for the future.

A roar of excitement could be heard from the direction of the courtyard. Thanks to Fukube-san's smooth-speaking, the crowd seems to have been moved somewhat by his words. Though it sounded like he could have gone on further, before long, the quiz tournament had begun as I heard a loud voice announcing its commencement. I pray for your success, Fukube-san.

I must do my best as well.

Come to think of it, it does seem effective to entrust someone else to sell our anthologies on our behalf. However, just placing copies of "Hyouka" at other people's stalls alone will not increase its appeal. So while it's important to seek new venues to sell our anthology, isn't it also important to raise the appeal of "Hyouka" as well?

I went through this thoroughly as I had my lunch. Take my family business for example, we would normally have decided which market to sell our rice to. Though we would like to expand our market, if our quality is below the standards required by the government, nobody is going to buy our rice.

This is because rice isn't a really sensational product, much like our anthology right now, which wasn't exactly a necessary commodity. So the situation the Classics Club is facing is quite similar to this.

In order for rice to be sold in large quantities, it has to be of "very good quality." This "quality" may be based on its "tastiness," its "safety," or its "affordability."

However, "Hyouka" was already a finished product. Though we were extremely diligent in ensuring its quality, there was no way we could further enhance it anymore than it is. The only variable left that we could manipulate would be its "affordability," but we would prefer not to adjust the price so much that it falls below our break-even point.

In order to improve the quality of "Hyouka," I decided to consider it from the standpoint of the public's awareness of it.

And so, my eyes fell on the Special Edition of the wall newspaper, the Kami High Monthly. Upon reading some of its details, it seems to be published once every two hours. If "Hyouka" gets a mention on here, then everyone would become aware of it. Fortunately, I am acquainted with the president of the Wall Newspaper Club. Even I at least know that having connections can take you a long way.

Anyway, as lunch time had already been over for some time, I was busy looking for the Wall Newspaper Club president...

"Hey, Chitanda-san, wanna go see that?"

"Ehh? I'm sorry, but I'm in a hurry."

"All right ladies and gentlemen, the second Magic Club performance will begin in five minutes!"

...Oh, yes, I was heading to the Wall Newspaper Club. I heard someone chatting behind me.

"Have you seen the movie made by Class 2-F yet?"

"Yeah, I have. Pretty interesting, wasn't it?"

Ugh.

All these decorations and all this liveliness is just too captivating. It was at

this moment that I envied Oreki-san's ability to not get excited by anything.

Before long, I'd come before the Biology Room on the third floor of the Special Block, where the Wall Newspaper Club room was located. Though right now, their members were in the adjacent Preparation Room instead of the Lecture Room, where they had their pens, scissors, glues and instant cameras laying around. Surrounding a table normally used for school experiments were four members, who didn't seem rather busy as they chatted leisurely. One of them, Toogaito Masashi-san, with whom I was acquainted, noticed my presence and stood up.

Though I'm quite tall for a girl, even I had to look up when looking at Toogaito-san. His father was well-acquainted with mine, which was how I knew him. Though it wasn't until this July that we spoke for the first time.

With a smile, Toogaito-san greeted me.

"Hello there,"

I bowed my head. Careful not to make the same mistake I made with Tanabe-san, I chose my words carefully.

"Good afternoon, Toogaito-san. Can the Wall Newspaper Club please write a story about the Classics Club?"

However, even Toogaito-san's eyes went wide after what I said. I wonder what it was that I said wrong? Frantically recalling what I had just said, I couldn't find anything disrespectful about it.

Oh no... I just realized, did I forget to explain my situation properly again?

Toogaito-san turned to glance at the other club members before turning back to me and said in a lowered voice, "...What's with this all of a sudden? It's not really possible."

"Oh, I'm sorry. Would it have been better if I had made an appointment first?"

"No, that's not what I meant,"

Toogaito-san rubbed his forehead and said, "I'm no longer with the Wall Newspaper Club."

"Eh?"

"I'm a third year, so I'm retired already."

Oh.

H-how did I not notice that before? This would of course be natural. It's completely obvious.

"I-I'm sorry."

"No, you don't really have to apologize..."

For a moment, I felt like I was of no help, and was feeling a bit depressed. But soon a fine idea came to my head. If Toogaito-san had retired, then this could work.

"Then, could you introduce me to one of your juniors so that I may make my request to him instead?"

However, Toogaito-san looked even more troubled than before.

"Well, I can introduce you, but I don't think it'll make much of a difference."

"Not much of a difference?"

"Our Special Edition goes up every two hours, so we have to get everything prepared before then. So to ask us to write something about the Classics Club now would be a bit too much, you see."

I see. Indeed, while I thought of the possibility of getting mentioned in a Special Edition every two hours, I totally did not consider the fact that they would need to prepare a draft edition beforehand.

So I said in resignation, "So it's impossible?"

I could hear myself sounding depressed.

"Well, I didn't exactly say it's impossible. As we should still have two more days of news to report, it can be done. However," Toogaito-san said with a tense expression, "We won't publish a story just because we've been asked to. There are over 50 clubs being represented in the Kanya Festival; there's no way we could introduce every one of them, so we have to give priority to those whose activities really stand out. That being said, if you could show us that the Classics Club is engaged in activities that stand out, then we'll write something about it."

It was a strict statement concerning the conditions on having a story written.

"T-then, what about the contents of the activities?"

"The club activities that we cover are all serious in their contents, so if we find a story request that is worthy of our interest like an ad-balloon, then we'll publish it."

But we haven't got any ad-balloons.

A while ago, Fukube-san had clearly emphasized about the origin of the term "Kanya Festival." Yet Toogaito-san said he only covers serious club activities. Yet besides its name, there wasn't really much in its contents which "Hyouka" could really be called attractive...

I'm sorry, Oreki-san and Fukube-san, I also do not know how to face Mayaka-san as well. Once again, I found myself unable to be of much help.

"...I see. Sorry for taking your time..."

As though trying to cheer me up, Toogaito-san said, "You can come back if you can find anything interesting, I'll see what I can do to help."

I think I nodded, but I wasn't even sure if I had the strength to move.

As things were not making any progress, it seemed my body had also lost its strength. But it would not be nice to trudge just because of that, so I tried my best to walk as I normally would. Though I wonder if my discouragement would still show on my face. Walking along the decorated corridor, not knowing where to go next, I heard someone calling out to me.

"What's wrong, Eru? You look quite depressed."

Looking up, I saw a small tent set up on top of the staircase. To be more precise, it looked more like a Native American teepee. The voice came from inside the teepee. The inside of the teepee could be seen from the outside.

"You were drooping your shoulders and looking disappointed. Did something happen?"

Inside of the teepee was a regular classroom desk, and seated on the chair was a person I was familiar with.

I smiled at her and said, "Well, a lot has happened..."

"Hmm?"

She tilted her head and smiled as she caressed an elegant looking crystal ball lying on top of a silk cloth on her des

"Then, how about having your fortune told?"

This person is Juumonji Kaho. Within Kamiyama City is a large and rather old shrine called Arekusu Shrine, and Kaho-san is the daughter of its head priest. While the Chitanda family's annual spring and autumn festival ceremonies aren't held at Arekusu Shrine, as I often meet her a lot, we ended up being well acquainted with each other. She was quite an attractive person, with her silky hair and small glasses. I liked the unique way Kaho-san often looked mature and polite.

Kaho-san had liked visiting the library ever since she was little, and so she was very knowledgeable in many things which I was unaware of. So I was quite surprised when I learned which club she had joined. Since Kaho-san wasn't quite good with hanging out with other people.

"Having my fortune told? That means..."

"Yes, this is the Fortune Telling Association stall."

"Where are the other members?"

Upon hearing that, Kaho-san made a rather cynical smile.

"Oh, it's just me at the moment."

"Eh, that's unexpected. But isn't it supposed to be popular?"

"That would be the Charms Association. They're the more popular club."

Speaking of which, I do recall seeing such a club being mentioned in the notice board.

"Well, how about it?"

As she spoke, Kaho-san began lining up objects on her table.

"If the crystal ball isn't to your fancy, then how about bamboo stick or card divination? Though these are just imitations. There's also coffee grounds divination and of course, the standard Tarot cards..."

As she rummaged through the items in a paper bag beside her feet, she suddenly stopped.

"Oh, we can't do Tarot cards today."

"Eh? Why's that?"

Hearing Kaho-san sound troubled for once piqued my interest. This was due to the Classics Club having once discussed Tarot cards back in the summer holidays, so I was thinking maybe we could have our fortunes told with Tarot cards.

Kaho-san saw my expression and understood right away.

"...Of course, you've always liked stuff like this. Here, have a look at this."

She took out a greeting card from her paper bag. Taking a glance at the card she showed me, I saw everything that was written on it, as it was in a rather large font, which read:

"What's this...?"

"It's quite a quick job if this is the work of one person. I only just left for a bit, and when I came back, someone had taken the 'Wheel of Fortune' card from my Tarot deck and left this."

So it was stolen? But the signature at the end of the card...

"It says 'Juumonji'."

"Indeed, I wonder if it's supposed to be addressed to me?"

The Juumonji family has two children, but right now, only Kaho-san is attending Kami High, and I've not heard of any other person called Juumonji in this city besides them. So Kaho-san is the only Juumonji in Kamiyama High. It would be incredible for a thief to use Kaho-san's name to steal her things.

It's all very strange. I decided to ask her something which I had meant to ask just now.

"Have you found the card yet?"

Kaho-san smiled bitterly.

"I wouldn't have said we couldn't use Tarot cards today if I had found it."

Oh, yes, of course.

"That's very worrying."

"Yes, though it's cheap, it's still a fortune-telling tool. I really wouldn't want to have to go through the trouble of acquiring another set as a result."

While saying that, instead of rummaging through her paper bag, Kaho-san took out a small memo paper from her pocket.

"But I wouldn't worry too much about that. I do wonder what the thief is up to, as this was also left behind,"

It was a memo paper torn from a notebook, on which was scribbled, "It will be returned after the Cultural Festival." ...This was indeed a strange thing for a thief to do. I do find it very odd. Looking at my expression, Kaho-san smiled.

"You seem to have cheered up a bit."

"Really?"

"Are you curious about this?"

I tilted my head

"...Yes, a bit."

"A bit, huh? Then let me show you one more thing."

From her paper bag, she took out something which I also had, the "Kanya Festival Guide," the official pamphlet for the Kamiyama High School Cultural Festival.

Looking at it placed beside the crystal ball, I asked, "What's special about it?"

Kaho-san opened the pamphlet.

"The contents are exactly the same as any other. Though when I found it, it was open with the card placed on the last page of the club comments."

The participating club comments were printed on the last page of the pamphlet. As its name suggests, it displayed a single line of comment from

each participating club mentioned by the pamphlet.
Apart from that, there was nothing strange or special written on the page.

"...I wonder what it all means?"

Kaho-san smiled gently and shrugged her shoulders.

"I wonder. It's the Cultural Festival, someone's bound to come up with some strange ideas, so it's nothing out of the ordinary. Personally, I couldn't care less as long as the 'Wheel of Fortune' is returned safely."

The finals consist of contestants racing each other in pushing the answer button, first to win seven points wins the race.

Though I did say it no longer mattered whether I won this quiz tournament anymore, this is an arena where I can put my database to good use. So it's a waste to just throw it away like that.

The Quiz Club president did mention on the radio broadcast that they'd "prepared questions that not just people who are good at quiz shows could answer," and now I see why he said that. Besides the usual quiz-show like questions involving show business, sports, social matters and trendy stuff, they've also included local topics as well as high school education related questions. I am of course well-versed in local topics, though the academic questions were a bit... okay, I know what you're thinking. For questions involving mathematical formulas, I was so pathetically hopeless with them that I could not even move my fingers towards the answer button. How on earth did I manage to weather through all these maths tests all these years?

Of the four contestants, three had taken six points, including me, Tani-kun and another girl. (While Tani-kun couldn't answer the strange questions, he was rather fast in answering the more generic ones.) The remaining person had five points. This was quite a fascinating battle; the contestants were all rather capable. For the Quiz Club this was no doubt a successful tournament.

But now it's time to end this. I'll be taking this last point!

"...Now for the next question. Please name the president of Kamiyama..."

A local question, huh? Concentrate...

"...High School's Student Council..."

I know the answer to this question, but I can't push the button just yet. For she may be asking us to name the president's favourite colour or something like that instead.

"...And give his full name please."

Now! At an instant, a light lit up.

"Yes, Shimizu-san?"

What? It's not me?

Shimizu-san, the girl beside me, answered in a calm voice, "Kugayama Muneyoshi."

" ....."

Miss Announcer, you don't need to gasp, she's correct.

After a brief pause, the announcer lifted the girl's right arm and declared, "Correct! And the winner of Quiz Trial 7 is Shimizu Noriko-san of Class 3-E!"

Haha. Oh well, too bad.

Only the winner gets to receive the prizes. And as Shimizu Noriko-san (who didn't even bat an eyelid when answering the more odd questions. She's an interesting person, I must try and remember her name) received hers wrapped in paper, I had no idea what it was. Oh well, I didn't feel bad about losing, and I wasn't interested in the prizes anyway.

As the trophy presentation was finished, the Quiz Club president gave his greetings and wrapped up the Quiz Trial tournament. The crowd then began to disperse to all directions of the school campus. It sure was fun, not only did I raise the Classics Club's appeal, I also managed to have some fun as well. Now, I wonder where I should go next. As I was prepared to return with a smile, someone called out to me.

"Hey, Fukube."

It was Tani-kun. Smiling, I raised my arm to greet him.

"Hey, too bad we didn't win."

"Indeed. Guess it's a draw."

A draw, huh? It's not like I'm competing with Tani-kun... Oh well, whatever.

"Guess so," I replied.

"Well, you need something?"

"I did say I had something interesting to tell you before we were interrupted."

Come to think of it, he did say something like that, but I must have forgotten. As I wasn't really intent on hearing what he wanted to say then, this must mean it's something Tani-kun wants me to hear. Since it's no big deal, I decided to hear what he had to say.

"Seems to be so, did something happened with the Go Club?"

Tani-kun nodded satisfyingly.

"Yeah, some of our Go stones have been stolen."

"Oh?"

I wasn't exactly thinking *"Is that so?"*

"The stones weren't lost but stolen, you say? But what makes you say that?"

"The thief left a note on the Go stone container,"

Tani-kun smiled as he said, "The note read 'The Go Club has lost its Go stones,' it's all really intriguing, as we have no idea whether any stones were stolen at all. As we don't normally use all the stones in the container, so there's no way of knowing if someone were to take away one or two, or even ten stones."

"Why would someone steal the stones?"

"Maybe he wants to play Gomoku?[17]" Tani-kun said in a rather strange way.

While I didn't find it to be a rather high-class joke, I decided to laugh along with him. If that's the end of this "interesting" story, then he didn't really need to go out of his way to tell me.

I said bluntly with a smile, "Maybe it's a prank by someone from the Go Club?"

Perhaps not happy that I didn't seem interested with his story, Tani-kun looked a bit depressed.

"Yeah, maybe."

"Well, I'm off for now."

"No, wait."

He called out to me before I could move.

Tani-kun said with a strangely stiff smile, "Fukube, will you be participating in other tournaments as well?"

"...Yeah."

As I nodded, Tani-kun raised his right arm and pointed his finger at me.

"I won't lose to you next time. It's not over since we only drew this time. We'll settle this!"

...I was at a loss for words.

Together with the silence, I could only give him my usual smile as a reply.

Tani-kun looked quite satisfied as he said, "Good. What will you be participating tomorrow?"

Without giving it much thought, I replied in a normal manner, "...The tournament held by The Cooking Club tomorrow, I guess?"

"Okay, then we'll settle this tomorrow! I'm looking forward to this!"

Tani-kun waved his arms and left looking rather excited.

Phew, that sure was a hard to deal with fellow there.

A score to settle, huh? It never even crossed my mind. I was hardly concerned with how satisfied Tani-kun would be with the outcome anyway.

It's true that I often enjoy myself in many things. Indeed, I would have so much fun that Houtarou would end up staring coldly at me.

But what's most important is for me to experience this personally. I see enjoyment as basically a give-and-take relationship between the provider and receiver of the entertainment. This is why I could never be as fanatical in my interests, be it Sherlock Holmes or herbology, as my best friend (whoa, this is quite embarrassing for me to actually utter it, but his is the first name I could think of) Houtarou or the magnificent Mayaka.

I'm rather naive when it comes to things that I like, find interesting or enjoy. Using a bookshelf as an example, normally a bookshelf would contain reference books or novels used to kill time, but in comparison, my bookshelf is not worth showing to other people. (Though if it's Mayaka, she'd probably want to have a look... But it's unlikely she would ever say it out loud.) Similarly, my relationship with the provider of entertainment is simply to quietly have high expectations and taking it easy as I enjoy myself.

So according to my psuedo-Epicureanism, this talk of "settling scores"...

Well, it's inelegant.

But this is all trivial, as I had no intention of giving it my all. To put it simply, Tani-kun is simply participating in tournaments which I'm participating in out of his own accord.

I meandered to and fro as I left the now rather empty courtyard.

By the way, enjoying oneself and worrying about one's friends are totally different matters altogether.

I wonder how Houtarou's doing now?

And I wonder if Mayaka is doing fine?

2.3 - Yet Another Storm

020 - ♦04

I had originally wanted to just keep a low profile.

I totally did not intend to get into an argument with anyone.

It all began when Kouchi-sempai said to President Yuasa as the flow of customers started to decrease, "Well, turns out it was a mistake to sell such plain stuff after all. Nobody's coming at all. But it's not too late for us to change this and turn it around. We should have an anime character poster outside. Since we're all so free anyway, it wouldn't take us a lot of time to draw one."

I didn't believe the reason there were so few customers was what she said. The anthology was selling pretty well. However, it was indeed true that the stall was far from lively no matter how positively I try to see things. I wasn't particularly against the idea of drawing an anime character poster in order to attract customers; at least it's better than dressing up in skimpy cosplay to attract the boys.

But what I couldn't stand was Kouchi-sempai trying to bring the president into all of this, seeing as how she was now being surrounded by Kouchi-sempai's followers. It looked as though she was being protested against. Though President Yuasa merely smiled calmly, I wondered how she must have felt.

"You may be right, but this was what we all decided on doing..."

"It may have been decided, but not by majority consent. To begin with, what's with this anthology anyway? A review of a hundred manga titles just sounds so tedious, who on earth is gonna read that? We should have made more parody mangas instead."

Come to think of it, someone had suggested everyone in the Manga Club could try making their own parody manga. Right now, there were a few of them lined up around the stalls. The reason why there were so few of them

was mainly because they were either not confident about displaying their works in the Cultural Festival, or they did not want to end up making a loss. But to blame it on the presence of *Zeamis* was just absurd.

Upon being told that no one would bother reading the anthology that I worked so hard on, the atmosphere in the room became delicately tense. To begin with, Kouchi-sempai's group was entirely uncooperative in the making of *Zeamis*. Uncooperative as in shoving the work to other people. Even someone as lazy as Oreki still bothered to take time to write up the manuscript despite constantly complaining about how bothersome it was, but Kouchi-sempai's followers were simply slacking off. Even now, not a single one of them had offered to help sell it. There were quite a few people in the club who found such behaviour revolting.

The only reason such sentiments had not erupted was due to Kouchi-sempai, who had herself diligently worked on her own rather interesting column. She didn't even brag about the fact that she had it completed within the day.

Extending her arms from within her long Taoist priest robes, Kouchi-sempai crossed them and looked up as though preaching some truth.

"Even if we assume that there's no such thing as a boring manga, this would be like reading an interesting manga a hundred times over. Anyone would get bored doing that. There's simply no meaning to it, right?" she said, seeking approval from those around her. A chorus of barely audible agreement could be heard, muttered by her followers. If you want to be a Yes Men, you could at least be more assertive in your agreements.

But to say that it has no meaning, well...

Some of the members turned their gaze toward the sales booth where I was seated... While I was indeed the only one who disagreed with Kouchi-sempai, I would have preferred they not look at me like this.

Kouchi-sempai went on, "Besides, wouldn't it be better to use an anime character to capture attention? Why does this gloomy anthology of all things have to be the centrepiece? We ought to have something more flashy."

She then turned her gaze to the other members besides her own followers. Even as I sat silently at the sales booth, our eyes met.

I didn't know whether it was my imagination, but when Kouchi-sempai looked at me, the corners of her lips were raised.

Was she provoking me? Was that smile of hers just now a provocation?

Would Fuku-chan trust me? The thought flashed by in my head that he wouldn't. But it was true that all this time during the Cultural Festival, I had behaved myself within the Manga Club, as I still had to take care of the Classic Club's anthology.

But I was at my limit. I wondered why I ended up that way. Even I myself was surprised at how cold I sounded as I remained seated and said, "What exactly do you mean when you say it's all meaningless, sempai?"

Kouchi-sempai looked as though she had expected a response from me. Turning her back to President Yuasa, she smiled and said, "It is meaningless regardless of whether it's interesting or not. Surely you should understand the meaning of that, no?"

"I understand the meaning of your words, but I don't understand how you come to such a conclusion. I spent a lot of time working on this anthology, and so have the others.

"I'm not asking for recognition for our hard work, but if you're going to declare all that meaningless, then please at least elaborate on your reason for it."

On one side was Kouchi-sempai looking rather composed, while I on the other hand probably looked snappy. I would probably look like an idiot to an outsider.

With a sneering smile, Kouchi-sempai took a step towards me.

"Yeah, maybe I was mistaken in saying it was meaningless. Sorry about that, Ibara, I was trying to say it was too assertively harmful."

"Whichever it is, I would still like to hear why you think it is so."

"You see, I've been thinking,"

As though demonstrating to those around her, she waved her arms about.

"Not every manga ends up as a classic. Just because you like a title it doesn't make it a classic. Nine hundred ninety nine people out of a thousand could have decided it was crap. Yet, you would disregard such consensus and promote your own bias? *That* is what I call harmful."

For a while I hesitated at how to respond. A member who was standing beside me lashed out.

"How can you be so sure that is bias!?"

While I understood her sentiment, it was not the right moment for her to interject. Yet Kouchi-sempai merely gave her a glance and ignored her. She could have easily countered the accusation of whether the anthology was biased or not by giving a definition of what the word "bias" means. Still, she had not chosen to do that.

This means she did not intend for the argument to be ambiguous.

I took a gulp and said, "Let me get this straight. You're trying to say we were being subjective?"

"Yeah."

"So you find the viewpoint that 'Subjectively, any manga can be a classic, and so it is meaningless to call a manga bad' harmful?"

Kouchi-sempai nodded satisfactorily.

"Yup, that's what I meant."

"But–"

As I was about to respond, I noticed someone's hand moving. Before me, the pile of *Zeamis* copies were being removed by President Yuasa, which I didn't mind.

There was a decisive flaw in Kouchi-sempai's argument, yet I wonder if she has noticed it already? While feeling uneasy, I tried to maintain a calm voice and continued, "In that case, wouldn't it also be harmful to think that 'Subjectively, any manga can be rubbish, and so it is meaningless to call a manga good'?"

In that way, there was no way she could agree with that. But if she disagrees, then she would have to rephrase her argument. Despite being confronted with such a contradiction, Kouchi-sempai gave a profound smile and said, "Yeah."

"Wha–"

For a moment, I was lost for words. Even her followers murmured. It was as confusing as falling into nothingness. No one could understand what she was thinking when she made such a response.

Taking advantage of my wavering, Kouchi-sempai spoke cheerfully.

"But it's true, isn't it? Since even you thought so.

"Just because a manga is called boring doesn't mean the manga itself is boring. It simply means the person's tolerance antenna is set rather low for the title. So for those cowards who do not want to express themselves clearly would say 'This manga doesn't suit me' rather than just call it boring.

"So it's the same thing. Just because a manga is called interesting doesn't mean the work itself is interesting. It just means the person has a high tolerance for the interesting aspects of the title. Am I right?"

For some time, I've always found Kouchi-sempai to be rather reckless. Even though she has a lot of admirers as a core member of the Manga Club, I just found myself looking down on those people. Right now, I feel like I know why I felt that way. Kouchi Ayako-sempai was just such a person.

I can't lose to her... I just can't lose.

At first, I was merely lashing out at her for calling the anthology we had worked so hard on meaningless. But now it's become more than that, she

was laughing at the basis of my beliefs itself. I wasn't the type to just simply laugh it away and suck it up. The urge to fight back welled up within me, I licked my lips and countered, "...So you're basically saying there are no mangas that are called classics or masterpieces? Other mediums like music, art and novels all have what you call classics and masterpieces. Are you saying that even those don't exist as well? Or are you saying this only applies to manga?"

I, along with many Manga Club members, do not believe that as an expression medium, there would exist flaws within mangas that cannot be rectified.

Not even Kouchi-sempai could say that just because a work is a manga, it cannot become a classic.

And indeed she said no such thing.

"I never said that there's no such thing as a classic or masterpiece manga."

"But isn't that what you were saying? That a work is rubbish no matter how you look at it?"

"Yeah, it is."

She withdrew her sneering smile and said, "But masterpieces *do* exist.

"After years of being scrutinized by critics and standing the test of time, only those works which contain the highest common factor remain. These are what we'd call 'masterpieces.' If not highest common factor, then the works which receive the most acceptance, which is basically the same thing.
"So I'll say this: it's just foolish for the Manga Club to do something like review manga, where we just go about deciding if this work is great or that work is crap. We're just saying what comes out of our heads. We should cut that out and just be content to enjoy what we read."

"Then,"

Before I could even think, I fired back, "Do you not recognize the existence

of the geniuses that gave birth to such masterpieces? Do you not recognize that the works of such people are wonderful and deserve to be passed down the generations?"

"Don't be so long-winded, Ibara, of course I don't. That's why this is all part of your subjective opinion. I've already said that masterpieces are those that withstand the test of time."

"..."

Kouchi-sempai's gaze was sharper than a while ago. I too was probably glaring back at her. I felt myself breathing heavily.

I sensed that now was the time to pull out my trump card.

The treasures I have are something that would have to be shown to her if to repudiate her. If I didn't repudiate her, then I would have to repudiate my treasures. Though I was reluctant to do this, I had no choice. So I slowly said, "You're wrong."

"About what?"

"This has nothing to do with one's subjective opinion. You say such outrageous things only because you've never gone through what I've felt. There's a person whose manga is so terrific that I've yet to meet someone who doesn't think that way."

"Oh, now that's some boast you've got."

Kouchi-sempai spoke with a dark tone while dressed in her Jiangshi outfit. Without feeling daunted, I continued, "Based on what you said, even the manga that I drew would be on the same level as every other manga out there. But that is not true. What I'm saying is there's no way you could say that my manga could line up alongside this person's manga. That work is something which could never be eliminated over time.

"So tell me, sempai, have you read a manga called *Ashes at Dusk*, which was sold at the Cultural Festival last year?"

When I noticed, Kouchi-sempai had lost her usual calm demeanor. With an expression as though she was trying to strangle me, she replied briefly,

"...No,"

"In that case,"

If it doesn't work, then it can't be helped. If she does not recognize my treasure, then I'll just have to raise the white flag.

"I'll bring it tomorrow. If after reading it you still feel the same, then I'll have nothing to say."

Phew I sighed. In order for the truth to be spoken, such an outcome was inevitable. As a result, I sighed again, as this meant that I'd lost my chance to ask the Manga Club to help sell *Hyouka*.

It was then that I realized, and said, "What's going on here?"

The room was suddenly filled with people. A while ago there were only Manga Club members, and now the room was full of customers. Huh? Why? When did they come in? Could it be that they've been watching me argue all this time?

As I looked at the customers, they all avoided my gaze, and as though apologetic, began lining up to buy copies of *Zeamis*. Each stack contained ten copies. Already I saw two stacks of *Zeamis* copies being sold and President Yuasa bringing in a new stack to replace them.

Erm, I...

Taking a deep breath, I put on a smile and said, "Welcome."

The bystanders who were glancing at me quickly turned their backs around. Perhaps I had spoken in a rough tone, and maybe they thought I was dangerous?

If this was a manga, then veins would have popped up in my forehead already.

021 - ♥05

The Battle of the Maidens!

in Manga Theory Debate

...I wonder what this poster could be about? It was written in very huge and trendy letters.

As I happened to be passing by, I had decided to drop by the Manga Studies Club and pay Mayaka-san a visit, but I ended up being distracted by this strange poster outside.

Is this Battle of the Maidens currently going on right now? As I was about to take a peek inside, a female student emerged from the door. I recognized that person; it was the president of the Manga Studies Club, Yuasa Naoko-san.

"Um, what is this?" I pointed to the poster and asked.

Yuasa-san gave a gentle smile as she proceeded to slowly tear the poster down, she then turned toward a bewildered me and replied, "Oh, we're just finished with that. We'll be holding another at 1pm tomorrow, so please do come visit again. The Manga Studies Club wishes you a good day today."

I see.

Umm.

...The Classics Club also wishes you a good day today.

022 - ♠06

The clock hand shows that it will be approaching five soon. The first day was coming to an end.

The Classics Club members who were scattered around the campus were now gathered back inside the Geology Room. Though Chitanda and Satoshi had popped by many times during the day, this was Ibara's first time showing her face back here since this morning.

As I had a lot of free time, I took the time to pack the extra copies of *Hyouka* into the boxes and kept them hidden from view. As the person in charge of running the stall, it wouldn't look nice if the customers were to see us struggling with our sales, after all.

"Well, what do you think? My sales appeal worked a bit, didn't it?" Satoshi asked.

As I'm not as optimistic as him, I replied indifferently, "Sort of."

"Eh, really?"

I nodded. Truth be told, as soon as Satoshi made his speech, a few customers did appear. As a sales pitch, it sounded kinda stupid. I don't know what kind of fun he had in that competition, but his effort sure helped give our sales a little push.

Satoshi made a victory pose.

"All right! We shall do our best tomorrow as well. We'll be participating in The Cooking Club's cooking tournament tomorrow morning."

Ibara asked nonchalantly to his merry expression, "The one where you need three people to form a team?"

"Huh?"

Satoshi's smile stiffened.

"Three people? Really?" He said as he frantically took out the pamphlet. It's no good for someone from the General Committee to be unaware of what the events are about, after all.

Meanwhile, Chitanda looked kind of depressed.

"I'm sorry, I... I didn't do my best..."

"Don't worry too much about it."

To be honest, I hadn't expected much from her. Rather than having no expectation from her abilities, it was more to do with having no expectation that we would receive special permission to make changes to an event that had already been decided. As she looked down toward the ground, she seemed to have thought of something and looked up.

"Oh, but, I did come across something curious though."

Something, curious?

I felt myself shuddering at the mention of that word. Whenever this lady utters "I'm really curious about it," it means that things cannot go back to the way they were. For someone with such a burning sense of curiosity, it is impossible not to satiate Chitanda in her search for the answers.

Every time she says "I'm really curious about it," she has given me... I mean, us, quite a lot of commotion... These memories began flashing in my head.

However, this was simply not the time of the day for her to do that. Once she got things started, it would be impossible to suppress her curiosity, but this did not mean that Chitanda would allow herself to run around in a rampage. She's not the sort to brashly go about in search of the answers under the banner of curiosity. Similarly, if there were other things that needed to be done, she would not prioritize her curiosity over those.

As though realizing how dangerous she could become, she turned her gaze towards the box containing the *Hyouka* copies.

"...Oh, nothing. It's not really curious," she said.

That was a relief.

Finally, there was Ibara, who seemed quite sullen. Though she's usually like that, even though she wouldn't admit it herself, she always seemed like she wanted to say what was on her mind, but then gave up doing so. Though she did not make any sound, her lips were moving as though muttering to herself. I couldn't help but notice that.

"Ibara, did something happen at the Manga Club?"

I decided to ask.

"Nothing."

She snapped back looking annoyed. Did I say something wrong? She didn't look rather angry as her face wasn't red.

"So, Houtarou, how many copies did we sell?"

Upon being asked, I leaned back in my chair and said, "Thirteen."

This was the best answer I could come up with. Had we printed twenty-four copies as we had intended, such a figure would have been impressive for a first day sale. At any rate, the real battle begins on the third day, Saturday.

Though I did not mention that, as I did not want to suffer from Ibara's sarcasm, and Satoshi would have given a buoyant face and go "Really?"
Two days left... It's not like we were trying to shore up all the support we could get. As if we could expect something explosive to happen anyway. Now was not the time for us to expect miracles.

As the chime rang, the first day of the Kamiyama High School Cultural Festival came to an end.

[177 COPIES REMAINING]

3 - The "Juumoji" Incident

3.1 - The Morning Landscape

023 - ♦05

Ashes at Dusk was a 30-page manga containing three short stories. Despite its morbid-sounding title, it actually came from Rennyo's[18] well-known verse: "We may have radiant faces in the morning, but by evening we may turn into white ashes."[19]

The overarching theme across these short stories is its emphasis on the abstract impermanence of life. Taking place in a classically dim Showa-style backdrop, the story describes a rather sad story. That said, the manga doesn't indulge itself in the retro-feel, but actually focuses on the platonic love of high school girls as well, so it was also rich in entertainment.

As a Third Year Junior High student, I was lost for words when I saw and bought this on a whim while visiting the Kamiyama High School Cultural Festival. Though there was nothing special about the theme, it just felt earnestly vivid to me.

A unique story that develops alongside its rich dialogue, it is supported by sensitive-looking artwork, which looked like something right out of a kabuki theatre. In certain pivotal points of the plot, the art would give a surreal effect. If I have to list a work, regardless of whether it is commercial or not, that leaves an impression on me, then it has to be *Ashes at Dusk*.

And thus, this was a manga that possesses a certain charm which words alone cannot describe. If I had to give criticism, then I would say the background art looked a bit amateurish, but even that is not enough to make it bad.

There were only two doujinshis that have taken my breath away completely, one was *Ashes at Dusk*, the other was *Body Talk*, a title I found in another doujinshi event unrelated to Kami High. I cherish these two works as my

treasures. But if I have to pick one out of these two, I would have to go for *Ashes at Dusk*.

In order to counter Kouchi-sempai's argument that a work can be great to begin with, regardless of what the readers think, I would have to show her a glimpse of this title. Such was my faith in its ability to charm.

I was very glad when I found out I made it into Kamiyama High School. Besides being glad that I've entered high school, I was even more glad that I had entered a school where you could sell any sort of manga freely as though its a soft drink vending machine. That's why I entered the Manga Studies Club as soon as I started school.

Yet I found myself a bit disappointed afterwards.

There was no one in the club that knew anything about the author of *Ashes at Dusk*.

But as I still had fun with people discussing stuff that we like, I thought that my decision to join the Manga Club was correct.

...That's what I thought anyway.

On the morning of the second day of the Kamiyama High School Cultural Festival, I arrived at school with a gloomy expression. I had no choice but to postpone what I intended to do. Prior to going to the attendance ceremony, I first headed towards the Manga Club.

I had intended to arrive early, but I found Kouchi-sempai had arrived even earlier. She was dressed in a classy tuxedo today. She's probably dressed as that Thai boxer. As she isn't particularly tall, yesterday's costume didn't really suit her. Was she trying to dress up as a different game character everyday, or does she simply want to cosplay in varying costumes? While I too am cosplaying as a different character than yesterday, I hadn't devoted as much time and money to my costume as she had to hers.

Kouchi-sempai looked towards me, or rather, the heart-shaped brooch on my chest.

"Going for old-fashioned again, I see?" she said. Today I wore a cardigan

over my blouse, and high socks coupled with a flared skirt. The only part that one could really call cosplay was the brooch and the beret hat I was wearing.

"Are you gonna shoot out Jintan[20] candies from that?"

"No, this is just for show."

"If you're going to cosplay as that character, you should at least put some effort into your hair."

Don't be ridiculous. It's already quite embarrassing for me to have such a gravity-defying hairdo, not to mention my hair isn't that long.

I need to get to the main topic right away.

"So, where's your *Ashes at Dusk*?"

It was Kouchi-sempai who started the conversation instead. I was surprised that she could remember the name of a title which she only heard once. I always thought her to be quite a quick-witted person, so it's not like she could really read my mind or anything.

As most of the members had not yet arrived, the Manga Club room was rather quiet. Everyone, including those members who weren't here yesterday, had known of my spat with Kouchi-sempai.

Even Kouchi-sempai, who had looked rather confident yesterday, now looked at me with a tense expression without even realizing it.

T-this is bad.

But I can't just run away now. Taking a deep breath filling my lungs as much as they could be, and while doing my best not to look abject, I said, "I'm sorry, I didn't bring it today."

"What?"

"I must have taken it to my relatives' house by mistake during the summer

holidays."

Yes, for the whole night and until early this morning, I was searching for my copy of *Ashes at Dusk* in my room.

I made sure to search everywhere I could think of. I looked about ten times or more within the bookshelves which contained my favourite books. I did the same for the other bookshelves, as well as opening up the boxes which contained my old mangas.

Yet I could not find my *Ashes at Dusk* anywhere. I do not remember lending it to anyone. It was not a book I would show Fuku-chan. And I was reading it repeatedly during the first semester...

So instead I brought *Body Talk* as a replacement. But I had already decided to bring *Ashes at Dusk* the day before, so this felt like a cop out. Bringing a book that could not satisfy my intention was just as good as not bringing it at all.

Yet I did not feel like I'd lost the book. As I remembered organizing my books during the summer holiday, and placing the old books in boxes to be sent to the storage warehouse in my grandparent's house. It must have been mixed up during that time. I'd probably find it if I looked there.

However, such a causal mix-up should not have happened, and I became slightly embarrassed because of it, as lately I've been making too many silly mistakes. Even if I reflect on them the deed has already been done. I wish I had not made such mistakes to begin with.

"Ehh??" A short disapproving sound was uttered. Looking around, I saw only President Yuasa with her calm expression; this meant it wasn't her. It must have been someone else.

"Hmm, so you don't have it."

Kouchi-sempai's expression eased. I, in contrast, bit my lips.

I felt like a carp on a chopping board right now. Victory has not yet been decided as we may still have arguments to put forward, but having said I would present evidence to support my argument, it couldn't be helped now

that I did not bring it. Hearing Kouchi-sempai's followers snickering just gets on my nerves.

One of them said, "Ibara, weren't you talking big yesterday? And you think you can get away by saying you don't have it?"

Another followed, "That's right. Don't you have other ways of apologizing?"

They probably won't be satisfied unless I go down on my knees. I decided to ignore them, as this was a problem between me and Kouchi-sempai alone. If she were to ask me to go down on my knees, I'd gladly do so.

However, Kouchi-sempai, as though losing interest in me, simply waved her hands and said briefly, "Then, help me with drawing a poster."

"P-poster?"

"Draw a moe character... I'm going out for a bit now."

She said that and turned to leave the club room.

As I was being basked in the cold stares of her followers, who had been left behind, I turned to speak with President Yuasa.

"President, do you have tools for drawing a poster?"

"Hmm? Oh, yes, we do."

I nodded and looked at my watch. It's almost time to head to the Gymnasium. I pointed to my watch and said, "I'll start drawing once I come back."

If I'm going to draw something, it's better if I put my full effort into it rather than stop midway. I wonder what I should draw for this "moe character" order from the victor?

024 - ♣08

After attendance was taken, I quickly left the gymnasium.

It wasn't because there was something I wanted to see, since I am after all a member of the General Committee, which has the duty of ensuring the smooth running of the Cultural Festival. At the appointed time, I needed to attend the meeting in the Conference Room where the General Committee is based, in order to carry out any orders decided by the Committee executives. Besides security, there's also event organizing to take care of. Particularly the setting up and taking down of event equipment by the various clubs requires a lot of labour. By the way, if there's no work to be done one gets to be free for the day. Carrying a noble sense of duty within me, I knocked at the door of the Conference Room.

"Fukube reporting. I see I haven't got any work today, I guess I'll take my leave now."

A pity that I wasn't able to help out with the General Committee in the Kamiyama High School Cultural Festival. Just as I was about to check out some strange event about to start at the Sci-Fi Studies Club, someone stopped me.

"Wait Fukube, you *do* have work."

Eh~.

President Tanabe was the only person inside, with a white board behind him covered by a timetable. Before long he turned to me and smiled bitterly.

"Hey, what's with the disappointed look you got there?"

"No, actually, this is me looking grateful that I get to contribute my efforts."

Actually, I had plans to be at The Cooking Club at 11:30 today, so I was only intending to work with the General Committee around those times that were convenient to me. Though I made a playful face, I wasn't exactly unhappy. Opening the door, I entered the room.

I rubbed my hands and asked, "Well, what is it? As long as it ends before 11:30, I'll jump into an inferno or leap into the ocean for you."

"It'll be over soon. There are bags containing visitor slippers in the staff room, you'll need to bring two of these bags to every building entrance. That's about it."

Indeed, this wouldn't take up a lot of time.

President Tanabe sure worked hard in making the pamphlet. Casually, I began to converse with him.

"Sempai, won't you go sightseeing during the festival?"

"Hmm? Oh."

Facing the whiteboard with its timetable, he turned to me and spoke gently. "There's a lot of menial stuff to take care of. Still, it requires me to move around the campus, so it's not like I don't get to see anything. Oh yeah, the movie shown by Class 2-F is pretty good, I hear."

Oh, this was quite some good news for us.

"But you're unable to join in any events yourself, aren't you?"

Tanabe-sempai smiled bitterly.

"I won't be able to attend to the General Committee if I do. Unlike you, it's not like I'm as talented or have many interests."

Do I look that talented or have many interests to other observers?

"Well, what is it? You got something interesting to tell me?"

"Interesting, huh?"

Thinking about it, there is the issue of the Classics Club having 200 anthology copies, but Mayaka wouldn't be happy if I used that as a joke. The Rakugo Club performance at the Opening Ceremony was pretty

interesting, but that's just my personal opinion. I've also heard of other stuff, but they aren't really that interesting when mentioned one by one.

Hmm. I didn't particularly find this intriguing, but if I had told him there was nothing interesting, the conversation would be too dull. So how about this one?

"We seem to have a phantom thief appearing at the Go Club."

"Oh?"

"Some Go stones were stolen from the container, and the thief even left a message behind."

"Really?"

Now this was surprising. This actually piqued President Tanabe's interest.
"I see. The Go Club, huh?"

Just as I wass about to say that this could be some prank staged by the Go Club themselves, President Tanabe continued, "I heard from Okano that something similar has happened to the A Capella Club."

"What?"

This time it was my turn to have my interest piqued. Something similar happening to the A Capella Club means that the possibility of this being an inside job by the Go Club has been ruled out.

"They seem to have had one drink bottle taken from the cooler box."

"Was there a message left behind?"

"I'm not sure if it's from the culprit, but they found a strange memo inside."

Now this looks pretty interesting. At the very least, my interest has now increased beyond the level when I first heard this from Tani-kun. We have a phantom thief lurking in the Kamiyama High School Cultural Festival! This is actually quite a fun prank.

Hmm hmm, now how should I plan my schedule from here on.

...No wait, now's not the time for that yet.

"What's wrong, Fukube? You're grinning."

"Nope, no~thing really."

It's still too early to indulge in this yet. In order for a phantom thief incident to be established, the phantom thief would need to continue with his prank. If I end up scaring the thief prematurely, it'll just make me look foolish. My experience tells me that it is better to first play with the thief.

Furthermore, not many within the school are aware of this yet. Even I have only just heard about this. I wasn't really concerned with whether the thief intends to attract much interest or not, but right now, his flute is only vaguely audible.

Since I still had an event to attend, it wouldn't be too late even if I take some rest now and allow the thief to surprise me even further. So it was better for me to leave this aside for now.

All right, now where's my drawstring bag?

"I guess I'll get to work then."

"Sure, good luck."

Having encouraged me, President Tanabe turned back towards the timetable board.

025 - ♠07

"I'll do my best again today!" Upon saying that, Chitanda left the room.

Now to begin watching over the stall for the day again.

How should I say this? I never thought being in charge of a stall where people hardly ever come would be this boring. I liked being idle and carefree, but certainly not being bored. At any rate, one doesn't require a lot of effort to insert the small change into the coin box repeatedly. Even if I were to take time to go to the bathroom, no one would come. Still, while I had brought a paperback novel to kill time, it was not the right book. It is quite unbecoming for an energy saver like me to actually desire some action just because I'm feeling bored.

Anyway, I should line up the *Hyouka* copies. Ten copies per stack should be just about right.

As I finished lining them up, a customer arrived. It was a male student I didn't know. The badge on his collar indicated he was a second year.
"You selling?"

Now this is quite a good omen. I'd better use my manners.

"Yeah, we are."

Hmm, maybe I should have said it longer, like "Yeah, we are, man." But that doesn't sound polite, does it? The second year sort of dangled towards the pile of *Hyouka* and looked at the cover.

"So this is the one that explains where Kanya Festival gets its name from?"

Wow, seems like Satoshi's microphone appeal was still having some influence. Or did he hear it from someone else? At any rate, I should be thankful.

As I nodded, the second year asked, "Can I stand and read?"

"I'm afraid you can't."

"Oh come on. It's only 200 yen, isn't it?"

"It may be only 200 yen, but please do buy one. We've got so many remaining, I feel like crying."

Not that I really would.

The second year laughed and took out his wallet and bought one copy. Upon thanking him and seeing him place his wallet back in his pocket, I noticed, "Sempai, your fly's open."

"What?! No way!"

He frantically placed his hand between his legs. Upon inspection, he lifted his head and groaned,

"Argh, can't be helped. It's broken!"
Looking closely, I saw black silk dangling from the opening. I see, now I get what he's saying,

"Your zipper's broken?"

"Yeah, and I've still got a whole day before I can even take time to fix this."

You have my sympathies. There's nothing I can do.

No wait, that's not true. I still have it with me, haven't I? Looking in the table drawer, I found it. It was the badge that I obtained earlier today. While I'm not interested in attending a fashion show, the badge does have a safety pin taped behind it, which was easily removed.

"There's only one, but try using this."

I handed the pin out to him. The second year looked grateful as though being blessed by the heavens.

"Whoa, thanks man. Amazing that you actually have one with you."

He proceeded to pin the hole shut... While it looked kind of strange, it should do for now.

The second year certainly looked glad as he muttered, "You're amazing, man, you just helped out big time."

"If you want to show your gratitude then you could buy another copy."

The second year smiled and waved his hand.

"No thanks,"

Though he seemed to have thought of something, and put his hand behind his trousers. Searching his back pocket, he took out a hand gun.

Staring into the muzzle, I asked, "Is this a robbery?"

"Don't be silly. It's a water gun."

The second year placed the gun on the table.

"You can have this as my thanks."

"I see."

I looked at the water gun and then towards him.

"...Is this your hobby?"

Rolling up the *Hyouka* copy in his hand, he whacked my head with it.

"Course not. I'm with the Gardening Club. We're roasting sweet potatoes today."

I still didn't see what this had to do with anything.

The second year continued while looking pleased, "You see, we need fire in order to roast the potatoes. And if there's fire, we'll need some water to put it out. But it would be too boring to just use a bucket, right?"

Ahh, I see. So he's supposed to be a soldier or something... So there are clubs who actually do silly stuff. I looked at the hand gun.

"Don't you need this then?"

"I already have one. This is just a side-arm. My main one's a Kalashnikov."

Fabulous. So they're actually thinking of putting out a fire using a water gun? They should instead be more careful with handling the fire.

Anyway, what use do I have for a water gun for watching over the Classics Club stall? The same goes for the badge, I seemed to be receiving all sorts of useless stuff. Though I have no reason to refuse him.

"Thanks, man. See ya!"

The second year left the Geology Room looking elated.
I looked at the hand gun he left behind and merely muttered, "...A Glock 17?"

Having an AK as a main weapon and a Glock as a side-arm. Isn't this rather inconsistent?

[176 COPIES REMAINING]

026 - ♥06

I'll do my best again today!

I was thinking a lot last night. What Tanabe-san and Toogaito-san said were both correct. I haven't managed to expand our selling spots, nor have I managed to get the Wall Newspaper Club interested in us. However, it is still too early to give up and say nothing could be done.

I heard rumours that the movie made by Class 2-F was quite popular. A few of my friends had wanted to go and watch, but it seems for the entire first day the Audio Visual Room was packed during airing.

We the Classics Club were slightly involved in the making of that movie by Class 2-F. Upon solving the trouble encountered during the shooting of the movie, Fukube-san duly named it the "Empress Incident." I didn't exactly do much, though Oreki-san's advice seems to have helped them a lot. Thus for me personally, it was a joyous thing to hear that the movie was doing well.

I was acquainted with one of the students from Class 2-F, Irisu Fuyumi-san. Speaking of which, this "Empress Incident" also applies to her as well, since she was involved in overseeing the production of the movie.

If we could arrange for *Hyouka* to be sold alongside a popular movie, there's a chance our sales might increase.
Thus today, I embark on ensuring such a deal could be done.

I'll do my best.

The Audio Visual Room was currently airing the movie *The Blind Spot of 10,000 People*. The entrance to the room was left open, with a black curtain to block outside light from coming in. Looks like its another full house today, but I have no way of knowing as I could not peek into the dark room. Outside was a signboard as tall as myself which read "Now Showing - The

Blind Spot of 10,000 People," with its airing times written on a paper taped below it.

There was a table beside the board which seemed to double as a reception counter. Though it's called a reception counter, as the movie is free, it's not going to collect any admission fee. Rather, they seem to be selling pamphlets for the movie. A girl was assigned to watch the counter, but as nobody seems to be coming while the movie was being shown, she's currently talking to someone else.

That someone else was none other than Irisu-san. It must be my lucky day, as I was prepared to look all over the campus for her. Upon waiting for them to finish their conversation, I spoke up.

"Good morning, Irisu-san,"

"Hmm? Oh, it's Chitanda."

Noticing my presence, she quickly ended her conversation with the counter girl. Walking some distance from the Audio Visual Room entrance, she beckoned me to come over beside the fire emergency exit.

Irisu Fuyumi-san is the daughter of the warden of Rengou Hospital, located right next to Kamiyama High School. She is just as tall as I am, though her figure is much more slender. Just to be safe, this doesn't mean I'm meaty compared to her. Her fine feature gives an impression of one who is very sharp, a resolute person who could solve any problem encountered. She was someone I admire somewhat.

Before I could say anything, Irisu-san pointed towards the Audio Visual Room.

"Thanks to you guys, our movie was a great success, as you can see. And to think we were in danger of not being able to complete the movie on time. You have my deep gratitude."

"Oh, no, there's no need to... Is Hongou-san all right?"

Hongou-san was originally the screenwriter for the movie, but I heard she collapsed due to stress.

"Oh, she's fine now. Would you like to see her?"

"I see... Oh no, not now."

Perhaps sensing my hesitation, Irisu-san lowered her voice.

"Do you need something from me?"

"Yes, rather than you, I have a request for Class 2-F."

I nodded deeply.

I'll need to get to the main point right away.

"Please help the Classics Club sell their anthology."

Irisu-san blinked her eyes twice, before quickly saying, "So you're asking us to sell your anthology where we're showing our movie, right?"

"Yes, that's the idea."

"All right. How many copies do you have?"

Eh?

"Y-you're accepting our request?"

As I replied without thinking, Irisu-san raised her brow.

"Why do you look surprised?"

"Oh, no, umm..."

As I was used to being flatly refused right away yesterday, I was at a loss hearing that my request was granted so suddenly now... Besides, I've once again forgotten to explain the details.

"...Thank you so much!"

"You can thank me once we've sold the copies. So how many copies you have?"

Irisu-san placed her right hand on her hip and asked as though she might tear the wall down anytime.

"We've printed 200 copies..."

"200?!"

Irisu-san's small eyes widened for an instant.

"That's a lot."

"We ordered more copies than we were supposed to by mistake. That's why, we're hoping to sell as many as possible. I-I..."

Oh no. Just when I thought I had obtained Irisu-san's help, I became lost for words. I'm still in a conversation, so I gritted my teeth and went on, "I'm sorry. As for the price, we've set it at 200 yen per copy."

Irisu-san nodded gently.

"If you're willing to lower the price to 150 yen per copy, then I can take twenty copies from you."

"Eh? Lower the price?"

"Our pamphlet costs 50 yen each. Together with your anthology, that would make 200 yen per set. Though we'll need to make a few arrangements."

"Umm, but, don't you need to consult with the others from Class 2-F...?"

"Oh, I'll take care of that afterwards."

Incredible. If it's Irisu-san, she would accept any request with no questions asked. Besides, wouldn't it be bothersome for her to receive twenty copies from us? Since we had only intended to sell twenty-four copies over three days.

As though she could read the anxiety on my face, Irisu-san added nonchalantly, "We should be able to sell them all by today. If we do, we may be able to order another batch from you."

"Is that fine with you?"

"It's fine."

...I felt my chest becoming tight again.

Irisu-san stretched out her right hand which she had rested on her hip. Was she trying to shake my hand? Taking out my hand, I placed it on top of hers.

"?"

"Rather than shake my hand, you should be showing me a sample copy instead."

A sample? I shook my head. Irisu-san gave a small sigh. Did I mess things up? She then softly spoke while I remained startled.

"...It's all right since it's me, but if you're really going to ask someone to sell your anthology for you, you should at least bring a sample with you. Or you won't be able to convince anyone."

I-I see. So that's how one gets things done.

"I understand. Thank you so much!"

It was then that I began thinking. Yesterday I hardly achieved anything. Maybe I spent so much time worrying about what to do next that my request would still get turned down. I've spent a lot of effort explaining my situation to both Tanabe-san and Toogaito-san, but if I had asked Irisu-san to come with me back then, I might not have had my requests turned down.

Yes, I must not make the same mistakes as yesterday. I must ensure my success rate is improved from now on.

Having made my mind, I decided to make another request to Irisu-san.

"Irisu-san,"

"W-what is it?"

Oh no, I ended up approaching too near to her. This was a bad habit which Oreki-san has often told me to be careful of. I took one step back.

"Irisu-san, you're good at having other people carry out your requests, right?"

"..."

"Please teach me how you do it!"

"WHA–!?"

Irisu-san made a flustered, out-of-character yelp, though her ruffled state only lasted for a moment before she began chuckling.

"...Heh, I've been called a lot of things, but never 'good at having other people carry out requests' before," she muttered.

Leaning against the emergency exit, Irisu-san gazed at me and spoke slowly.
"Right. You do tend to be too direct in your approaches sometimes. I'll teach you two or three methods which you can remember."

"T-thank you."

"What do you know about role-playing?"

Irisu-san lowered her head and closed her eyes and began thinking. This was the first time I'd ever seen her taking time to think. My body went stiff from the anxiety,

"...Right... Well, let's put it this way," she muttered and opened her eyes. She then raised her clenched fist towards me. I instinctively leaned backwards as a result.

"There are two ways to get people to carry out your requests. First, there is one in which you're expected to repay the favour received."

She lifted her index finger.

"The second is where you do not repay any favour."

She then lifted her middle finger. Before long, she withdrew both fingers and placed her hand back on her hip.

"For requests where you're to repay the favour, it means the person you're asking does not trust you."

"Eh?"

Maybe it had something to do with her calm way of speaking, but Irisu-san's serene voice seemed to have blocked out the noise generated by the Cultural Festival around us.

"For situations where you're dealing with strangers which you would not deal with again after you receive the favour, in nine out of ten cases, they would consider your request a rip-off. Even if they don't, they would try to minimize the effort they would put into handling your request. So in cases where you're expected to repay the favour, you mustn't just think about what you would expect them to do, but also take into consideration the time they have and the effort they're willing to make. You must also take into consideration that they may not be able to do what you request of them. If you're unwilling to do that, then they too will not be willing to take such a risk for your request.

"While you could use reverse psychology to make them think they're ripping you off instead, that would be too difficult for you. So for the moment being, you're more suited to the second type, where trust would be needed.

"In such a situation, you would need to provide them with mental satisfaction in order to carry out your request. It is easy to cut corners when only a physical reward is available, but not so for a mental reward. The best way to achieve that is to make them feel they're charismatic or popular, but

you will find you would not have much opportunity to use those. The next would be faith and love, but these would require a lot of time to prepare beforehand. By the way, I myself have never relied on these two.

"If possible, you should take advantage of their sense of justice or duty, their professional spirit or their self-esteem, but its difficulty is above intermediate. Though once you get the hang of those, you should be able to apply them to many situations.

"On the other end of the spectrum would be to make them think they're feared or superior to you, but we'll not go into that today.

"For you, as a beginner, you should aim to have expectations of them.

"Listen up, it's basically to make them think that 'Only they could accomplish this request of yours.' To make them think they're your only hope, which is pretty easy to do. It would not be rare for them to even make some sacrifices for you, since you have expectations of them, even if you're just pretending to.

"In addition, do not make them think the problem is huge. Don't let them know that you're desperate for their help. There just aren't many people who would help others solve a major problem with no benefit to themselves. Instead, you should make it look like the problem is very trivial, that way it'll make them feel exceptional.

"Finally, if possible, make the request where no one else is around to someone of the opposite gender."

For a moment, my head went blurry.

I-I just heard something really amazing. I never even thought about these things before. In order to have a stranger do one's request, one must make them feel loved and trusted, as well as feel superior because you have expectations of them, alone in a place where nobody can see... It's going to be difficult for me to digest all of this at once.

I would need time to slowly understand all of this. At any rate, I would need

to thank Irisu-san.

"Um, umm, I..."

Yet Irisu-san merely said, "Hurry up and bring the copies over."

And hurriedly returned to the Audio Visual Room.

I should at least bow deeply in gratitude to her.

Thank you very much! Irisu-san, I will not let your advice go to waste!

027 - ♠08

The paperback novel I brought turned out to be quite a bore.

Though I hadn't exactly wasted my money as I bought it for only 100 yen from a new second-hand bookstore, I still felt like i had been ripped off by them. I just couldn't force myself to continue reading on. Having said that, there's was nothing I could do but yawn. I should have brought a backup novel.

Hearing the A Capella Club singing yesterday sure was a good way to kill time. Wondering if they'd be singing again, I decided to stand up and open the windows... And I smelled a scent of burning leaves, as right below me were some people surrounding a stove. As there seemed to be some sort of armed sentries in that group, that must be the Gardening Club.

Sweet potatoes - just smelling their scent makes one feel famished. Whether its sweet potatoes or not, at the moment I felt like eating anything, since I overslept this morning and decided to skip breakfast. This was really my sis's fault for taking my alarm clock from my room without permission. As a result, I'm feeling a bit hungry. As it was only eleven, it was still too early for lunch.

As I continued to stare at the stove...

"Trick or Treat!"

"Yay!"

Someone intruded while shouting in strange voices. They sounded like girls, but I have no idea who they are if I can't see their faces. Or rather, there was no way I could see their faces. There were two intruders, both carrying baskets covered in white cloth and wearing pumpkin masks over their heads... Pumpkins?

W-what on earth? Pumpkin Heads? Halloween costumes already?

As I continued to look bewildered, "Trick or Treat!"

"Yay!"

They made the same greeting again while flailing their arms.
Were they trying to dance?

...I needed to calm down. All right, so they're in a Halloween mood. Does that mean I should throw beans at them? Or I should pour sweet tea at them?[21]

No, wait, I remember now. I looked coldly at the dancing pumpkin heads and said, "If it's candy you want, I haven't got any, so get lost."

One of the pumpkin heads gasped.

"Yikes! How mean!"

"But you are welcome to buy our anthologies."

"Not interested!"

"Who the hell are you guys anyway!?"

It was then the two pumpkin heads walked forward in synchrony and showed me their baskets. As though trained for this, they both spoke at the same time.

"We're doing door-to-door sales for the Confectioneries Studies Club. Would you like some cookies, biscuits and cream puffs?"

...

"What if I said no?"

"...Trick or Treat!"

"Yay!"

OK, I get it. I get it already, so stop dancing, you pushy saleswomen.

But this could be great timing,

"How much is one of your biscuits?"
"Heh heh, it's 100 yen per bag, master!"

They really don't have much consistency with their sales pitches. I took out one copy of *Hyouka*.

"...What's that?"

Whoa, they reverted to their normal voices.

"It's an anthology by the Classics Club. 200 yen per copy. I can swap two bags of your biscuits with this."

"Not interested."

"Oh, don't say that, I want your biscuits, after all."

"That'll upset the balance between supply and demand~"

It's useless. I decided to take out my wallet.

"Wow! What's that? It's so cool!"

One of the pumpkin heads, who was looking around the room, suddenly raised her voice. In her hand was the Glock 17 pistol.

"Wow, cool! How come you have one of these? Could you be a collector?"

"Hey, you think it would be better for our sales if we carry this around?"

Really? I think you'd scare everybody instead.

Oh well, if they wanted it, "I'll give you that semi-auto along with the anthology for two bags of your biscuits."

"Really? You're giving it to us?"

I nodded. Holding the Glock in her hand, she began dancing again. After spinning one turn, she took out two bags of biscuits from her basket as well as a small yellow paper bag.
"Here's a sign of gratitude from the pumpkins."

"What's that?"

"Yay!"

"Yay!"

Without answering my question, the two pumpkin heads took the glock and a copy of *Hyouka* and left. Those heads look rather large, will they be able to stand properly in those... Just hope they don't trip.

Opening the paper bag, I looked inside.

It's wheat flour. Looking at the description, it says "weak flour."

Once again I've obtained something I have no use for.

From a fountain pen to a badge, from a badge to a Glock, and now from a Glock to a bag of flour. This somehow feels like the story of the straw millionaire[22], yet somehow, the items I'm receiving don't seem to be rising in value. Come to think of it, weren't these people giving me these items simply because they have no use for them themselves?

Taking out 200 yen from my wallet, I placed them into the candy box which doubled as a register. Leaning back towards the windowside, I opened one of the bags of biscuits.

[171 COPIES REMAINING]

028 - ♣09

It's just past eleven. The Cooking Club's tournament will take place at half-past eleven.

This may sound like me bragging, but I do have some confidence when it comes to cooking. Though I have not taken into calculation about having three people as a team. I would have enjoyed it better if I could do this all on my own, but as we're not allowed to participate alone, I guess it can't be helped. Still, it's not as if I wouldn't enjoy myself, so I've invited Mayaka and Chitanda-san along as well. While it's also interesting to see Houtarou carry a knife, he probably wouldn't come even if I invited him.

Except... On one hand, Mayaka can really cook. I knew that, as she would occasionally bring her own boxed lunch. Though I don't know about Chitanda-san, so she's an unknown factor. When I told her about it, she readily agreed, "Understood. It's to promote our anthology, right?"

That was one of my concerns. Actually, I had two concerns. By the way, should they be called "concerns?" Wouldn't it be better if I describe them as "worries?" Hmm, I must do some research regarding the meanings of these words. Anyway, my other concern was whether Mayaka would make it on time after finishing her duties with the Manga Club.

Deciding to pay her a visit, I headed towards Preparation Room No. 1.

Whoa, there's quite a lot of people here. And Mayaka was saying how the Manga Club was quiet yesterday. It's basically packed today, it's like a carnival here. As I thought that, I noticed a poster pasted on the door:

Watch how their artistic senses shine at unwavering speed!

...I had never heard of such an event before.

I decided to take a peek.

"...Whoa."

I let out a gasp.

Mayaka, dressed in a cardigan over her blouse and wearing a beret cap, was scribbling her pen across an A3 paper without even moving her eyes away. This was Mayaka in serious mode. I could even hear the pen being tapped on the paper as she drew. I could even see her cheeks reddening as though blood was rushing to her head. I had no idea what she was drawing as I couldn't see it from here.

Next to her, the girl in a tuxedo was just as amazing. Just when I thought there were still a lot of white areas in her drawing, as though receiving some divine inspiration, she began to boldly colour the drawing already.

Again, I had no idea what she was colouring, but within five minutes...

"Done!"

She handed her drawing to the girls waiting before her. At once, many people gathered and placed the drawing on a table for it to dry. It was then I saw what it was, a drawing of a female character from a popular monthly manga series. That is good. That's Mayaka's drawing, no doubt. So Mayaka does the drawing while the tuxedo girl does the colouring.

Two of the Manga Studies Club's best artists, huh? I see.

I chuckled and turned back.

If Mayaka ended up not attending the cooking tournament and it resulted in us losing by default as a result of this, I wouldn't have complained.

3.2 - Wild Fire

029 - ♥07

As my long hair was in the way, I had it tied at the back of my head.

I had always wondered why The Cooking Club has a "The" as a part of its name.

That question was instantly answered by its president.

"Something unfortunate happened with the old Cooking Club, leading to its disbandment. So we re-registered under this new name instead."

They seem like they've been through a lot.

Having been invited by Fukube-san, I was now participating in The Cooking Club's tournament "Wild Fire." While it has a strange name for a tournament, upon participating, one would quickly understand why such a name was used. The Wild Fire tournament does not take place in the Home Economics Room, but outside on the track field.

The tables forming the makeshift kitchen counters were quite narrow, and use of water was to be limited. Cooking fire was provided by two-legged stoves on each counter... It is certainly strange in appearance, but on the other hand, it also meant any observer would instantly know what it was.

Besides, as this tournament involves teams of three people...

"Mayaka-san sure is late."

The deadline for accepting entries has finished, and there's only three minutes till 11:30, when the tournament would officially commence. Yet Fukube-san was surprisingly calm.

"Each team member has twenty minutes, so we'll just put Mayaka last. If she still doesn't come in 40 minutes, then guess that's too bad. We're only here to promote ourselves anyway, so it doesn't matter whether we win or not."

While he's quite right, I still continued to glance towards the field entrance.

A male student's voice spoke from behind us.

"Doesn't matter whether you win or not? That's hardly fun at all, Fukube!"

Could he be a friend of Fukube-san? I've not seen him before.

Though Fukube-san was usually energetic, perhaps even he was getting exhausted from being so active during the tournament, because he sounded quite indifferent when replying to his friend.

"Nah, we'll be giving our all."

Though his friend did not seem to mind a bit and smiled.

"At any rate, this rule of having three people on a team is great! Even if my cooking isn't up to snuff, I'll still be well covered by the other two teammates. Still, no one person can win it alone, so you gotta plan ahead accordingly."

"Isn't that the same for all team tournaments?"

"Anyway, have you found yourself some good teammates? Just so you know, Team B has got Suhara, who's the son of the chef of Miraku on Main Street."

"Ah, so I've heard."

"And I'm on that team."

Fukube-san gave an ambiguous smile.

"Wow, that's great. May the best team win then."

Just as I thought, something does feel strange. The Fukube-san that I know would have been more sociable. Still, his friend remained in good spirits and returned to his team. I gently called out to Fukube-san.

"Fukube-san... are you feeling all right?"

The person who turned around was the usual Fukube-san,

"How am I feeling? I'm feeling superb! I feel like making some of Fukube's Seafood Fried Rice today!"

Looks like I've been thinking too much into this. I smiled.

"I'll be looking forward to it... I don't know if I'm getting this wrong, but we're only allowed to cook rice from scratch. If you're going to make fried rice, wouldn't you have to cook last in order to properly prepare?"

Fukube-san doesn't look too lively. As expected, perhaps his exhaustion is beginning to show on his face.

An impressive crowd was gathered, about a hundred to two hundred, perhaps even more. To think we're going to cook dishes in front of this many people... This feels a bit embarrassing.

"Um... if Mayaka-san is to cook last, who will cook first then?"

"Hmm? Chitanda-san, I did say we're gonna make rice, so maybe you should cook first."

"But it'll take more than an hour to prepare the rice, that would be too..."

I wasn't able to explain myself properly, but perhaps Fukube-san realized it from my gaze.

He replied, "Fine, I'll cook first. Guess that's it for Fukube's Seafood Fried Rice. I can make that anytime!"

Oh no, you don't really have to say it so clearly.

Beside the makeshift kitchen counters was a podium, where The Cooking Club's president walked on and began to explain the rules. With a loud voice, he began to introduce the participating teams.

"We have a total of five teams who've entered the tournament, but as we only have four counters, only the first four teams to apply get to compete for the Wild Fire Cup.

"And now, the teams themselves. Entry No. 1: Team Ajiyoshi!"

It was a team with three third year male students. I took a glance at them and noticed two of them had quite long fingernails. Could it be that they rarely cook?

"Entry No. 2: Team Fata Morgana!"

It was the team Fukube-san's friend was in. One of them looked quite calm and reserved. Perhaps he's the chef's son from Miraku.

"Entry No. 3: Team Astronomy Club!"

Huh? It seems there's another club who thinks just like Fukube-san did and participated. One of their members waved both her arms to greet the audience... We've met her before—it was Sawakiguchi-san, who was dressed in her usual chignon hairstyle. Oh, she even threw a kiss to the audience. She seems like a tough opponent.

"Entry No. 4: Team Classics Club!"

Fukube-san pumped his right fist into the air. I was at a loss for what to do, but still, I decided to bow respectfully to the audience around us.

"The rules have been well explained in advance. Each team is to make three dishes. Ingredients are available in the basket in the centre of the field on a first-come-first-serve basis. We often get cases of participants only getting rice, so please plan what you need beforehand. If the ingredient basket has run out, you are allowed to procure ingredients within the confines of Kami High. We have the Gardening Club cooking sweet potatoes today, you know?"

Oh, I see. As the ingredients are first-come-first-serve, it would be better for the first contestant to prepare the ingredients for his teammates as well. I'm glad that Fukube-san is cooking first, as I would easily get overwhelmed by

too many choices.

"And now, first participants, on your positions..."

"Well, I'll be going."

Fukube-san waved his arm and headed towards the tables making up the makeshift counter. The four counters were set up in such a way that they surrounded the ingredients in the centre.

The Cooking Club president raised his voice from the podium.

"Wild Fire: START!"

The ingredients Fukube-san procured were three cups of rice, one bag of dried sardines, a bit of frying oil, a bottle of sweet vinegar ginger, four blocks of tofu, half a radish, three spring onions, six potatoes, a bit of black sesame seeds, 200g of sliced pork, one pack of sweet prawns, and a packet of potato starch. As for seasonings and spices like miso, soy sauce, wasabi, chili pepper, it seems like there is no limit on how much we can use them.

Fukube-san thought deeply for a bit before proceeding to boil a pot of water. Using the time the water takes to boil, he began to cut up the spring onions. Taking one of the three spring onions he'd procured, he began to chop them up into many tiny bits, though not as fast as professionals would chop them. It hardly looked hazardous. He next took out the dried sardines. Ah, so he's preparing miso soup.

Observing from the podium, The Cooking Club president began commentating on behalf of the audience.

"Oh, looks like Team Classics Club sure are thorough! They're slowly taking out the intestines of the sardines one by one! This is a very important step!"

After taking out the sardines' intestines, he began cutting up the radish into

smaller pieces.

Wait, Fu-Fukube-san! There's no problem with how you cut up the radish, but you've forgotten to peel its skin! But team members are not allowed to speak while their teammates are cooking. The radish! The radish! I tried to motion my body in order to let him know... The radish!

After cutting up all the pieces, he finally seems to have noticed and took out a peeler. Oh dear! He's peeling the skin off the small pieces he just cut one by one! But if you do that, they'll become too dry by the time you put them into the hot water!

After peeling off the radish skin, he placed the dried sardines aside... Though as he'd taken care of its innards, it shouldn't smell anymore. Fukube-san next turned his attention to the sliced pork. He walked to the centre to obtain some miso paste. Of the three types of miso: red, white and koji, he had chosen white. By now, even I knew what he was planning to make, and it was not plain miso soup. He now held a miso soup spoon in his left hand and a regular spoon in his right.

Twenty minutes passed and on the stove of our kitchen counter was a pot of pork miso soup.

"Twenty minutes is up! Please swap places now."

Fukube-san ran back towards where we sat, and the first thing he said was, "Didn't go as well as I thought!"

"The peeling of the skin?"

Fukube-san shook his head.

"Yeah that as well, but if I'm to make pork miso soup, I shouldn't have spent so much time taking care of the sardine innards! That took up a lot of time..."

He was right, we cannot afford to waste that much time.

"I-I'm counting on you, Chitanda-san."

I nodded.

Please leave it to me.

And just when I was wondering how Chitanda-san's cooking would fare...

She's fast! Not just in her movement, but in how she manages to get the knack of things as well. Despite the narrow space around her, she moves as though she has many limbs. Even the commentator is astounded.

"What on earth is going on with Team Astronomy Club's second member Sawakiguchi? Just what is she making? ...Whoa! Look at the superb way Team Classics Club's Chitanda is slicing the radish skin!"

Before time, the radish skin has been peeled into what seems like a long thin sheet of paper. She next placed the spring onion on the chopping board while preparing the sweet vinegar ginger. How does Chitanda-san manage to move so swiftly when she's usually quite meek, I mean, gentle?

Using the thin radish pieces, she wrapped them around the spring onions and ginger before placing them on the dish. That's one dish complete. Damn, and it's only been two minutes since she started.

It was then that Chitanda-san suddenly stopped moving, for about ten seconds. Just when I realized what was going on, she began moving frantically again. "Ah yes, the rice." Phew, that's the Chitanda-san I know.

Though she had only started to wash the rice, the way she washed it was incredibly thorough.

"Team Classics Club sure are taking their time to polish their rice... They're generously using up every ounce of the six litres of water allocated to them! In order to bring out the best taste in their rice, the Classics Club are cutting no corners with their resources! Look properly, that's the way you wash your rice, by slowly draining the water with your hands!"

She was gentle, yet fast. Upon deciding on the amount of water to be used, she brought it to boil and then turned her attention elsewhere.

"...Team Ajiyoshi has finished their second dish of miso soup. Are they planning on making a variety of miso soup? Meanwhile, it seems Team Fata Morgana's teriyaki is going smoothly!"

Chitanda-san's movement became more and more intense. She wrapped the tofu with a cloth and placed it in a bowl, then sprinkled salt and sugar on it while warming up the frying pan. No, she wasn't simply warming up the pan, she was frying the black sesame seeds with oil. She then placed and spread the tofu evenly across the pan. The commentary went ballistic.

"Oh my, Team Classics Club is making giseyaki! I am so moved to tears by Team Classics Club's Chitanda!"

Sounds like a dish I've never heard of before...

Chitanda-san next began to peel the potato skin while occasionally turning to tend to the frying pan. After peeling the potato skin, she took the tofu out of the pan. It now had an impressive colour as she placed it on the chopping board. Cutting up the tofu, she placed it on another dish. That's the second dish completed.

I could already smell the sweet aroma coming from the roasted sugar as well as the fried sesame. I was lost for words, indeed, I felt like eating that myself!

"...A sweet scent is coming from the dish of Team Classics Club! How formidable, for them to impress just by scent alone!"

Meanwhile, a sweet smell of roasted soy sauce came from Tani-kun's team.

"Team Fata Morgana has also finished their teriyaki. The colour looks superb. One cannot think of these people as mere students. Just who are they?!"

You're dealing with Lady Chitanda Eru, daughter of the Chitanda farming clan! Remember her name!

There was no time to wash the frying pan. As soon as she filled the pot with water and brought it to boil, without waiting she went straight for the sweet prawns, speedily removing their shells. She then turned the fire down when the rice began to boil. And when the pot of hot water started boiling, she threw in the sweet potatoes. Taking some radish, she began making wasabi sauce. Yup, guess that's the way to prepare sweet prawns.

Meanwhile, she briefly cleaned the bowl that held the tofu a while ago and placed the starch in it. I wonder what she's up to now. Feeling curious, I decided to look on.

Though the potatoes were now boiled, she didn't discard the soup right away. Using a pair of chopsticks and the miso spoon, she skillfully scooped the contents out. After draining them of moisture, she placed them into the bowl holding the starch and began grinding them with a mortar. Was she good at making food that involves grinding stuff? Starch and boiled potatoes, just what was she making? Cooking sure is complicated. People who possess the most surprises are the most interesting after all. I'm very looking forward to this. Taking the white stuff that emerged from the bowl, she wrapped them with a cloth and began squeezing them into lumps. She then dumped the lumps back into the soup.

"It seems Team Astronomy Club is continuing with their Avant-Garde cooking, I pray for the health of our judges... Whoa, Team Classics Club has just made imo-mochi! This Chitanda is extremely skillful! But, are they going to be okay?"

Imo-mochi, huh? I like that a lot. By the way, how much time do we have left? Looking at my watch, we still have two minutes. But wouldn't the commentator say something about the time if we're short on it?

Looking at the kitchen counter, I see a row of dishes being lined up, as well as a row of utensils, and the dishes now being prepared, and then the ingredients...

"AHH-~!"

I yelled. And instantly,

"Whoa there, Team Classics Club! No talking is allowed."

Damn, this is bad.

That's it, there's still time to let her know! This is really bad. Chitanda-san has made a grave error. But can it be resolved? I crossed my arms over my head to indicate to her that she's making a mistake.

Chitanda-san seems to have noticed my gesture, has she realized?

She gave a gentle smile and crossed her arms as well.

"..."

Looks like we're unable to communicate at all.

It's useless. Even if she were to realize, nothing could be done about it.

The imo-mochi began to boil inside the pot. Placing them on a small plate, she applied some soy-sauce over them.

And right on cue, "Forty minutes is up! Please change with your final member now," said the announcement.

"How do you think I did?"
Despite moving so swiftly, Chitanda-san showed no signs of fatigue and smiled. As for me, I smiled back, knowing I could never do what she had accomplished.

"You were amazing, Chitanda-san. I never knew you could cook that well."

Chitanda-san said shyly, "Is that so? I really like cooking."

"Yeah, I can see that. But..."

"But?"

Her expression became clouded.

"...Did something go wrong?"

The Cooking Club president commentated,

"Team Classics Club's final member has yet to appear! And to think they

performed so superbly until now..."

"Chitanda-san, this is a three-person team."

"Of course. I'm worried for Mayaka-san."

"No, even if she had come..."

I pointed towards the makeshift kitchen counter that Chitanda-san had just worked vigorously on.

On there was a pot of cooking rice, radish rolls filled with ginger and spring onions, giseyaki, imo-mochi, sweet prawn sashimi and pork miso soup.

Chitanda-san looked lively, as we were looking at her masterpieces. Yet... she first looked right, and then looked left again. Then she covered her mouth.

"...OH!"

Even if it were a joke, it was hardly funny. The only ingredients remaining were a radish with its skin peeled, and a little bit of spring onion left behind. It was as good as trash.

Hahaha, sorry about that, Mayaka.

If I had had more time, I would have drawn it better, but even if this was speed drawing I would still prefer to get it perfect, and so I ended up re-doing the fine details that I wasn't too happy with over and over again. I realized it was past the time I promised to meet up with Fuku-chan, but if I don't fix the shape of this eye over here, it'll look way too unbalanced.

That said, it wasn't easy just deciding where to redo. With all my resolve, I worked on those parts with my pen and eraser, and time flew by before I even realized.

"I'm done!"

Kouchi-sempai raised her eyebrows and looked at the drawing of a smiling girl.

"It doesn't look completely alike, but it's good enough," she muttered.

During these two and a half hours, we've drawn five standing portraits and eight facial portraits. While its not a number to brag about considering our speed, it's still quite a lot. Though I was mainly in charge of erasing any defects I see as well as completing the unfinished parts of the drawing, I really must go now. I was told I could still make it if I arrive at 12 noon, but it's now been over ten minutes since then.

Rolling up the posters, President Yuasa said, "Thank you Ibara. I'm really sorry to take up your time, even though you had an appointment."

As president, she didn't need to do any drawing, and was mainly involved in handing the completed drawings over to the sales booth to display. I gave the president my respects and duly bolted out of Preparation Room No. 1.

Instantly, I was engulfed by the atmosphere of the Cultural Festival. The whole corridor was covered with advertisements and decorations, as well as students walking about in a relaxed manner. I sped through the gaps that they created, it was in these moments that my small figure came in handy.

While I could not pay attention to the time as I was so busy drawing the posters, like the Quiz Club's tournament yesterday, I could hear what was

going on at the track field from the speakers.

"...Team Ajiyoshi has now begun preparing dessert by peeling the apple skins. But is this how you peel apple skins? They're making an interesting shape out of it! Team Classics Club's final member has yet to appear..."

I slid across the corridor to make a turn around the corner, leaping through flights of stairs that were pasted with posters. Having to change into my outdoor shoes by the shoe lockers was bothersome, and I took off at once upon putting on my shoes. At the end of a line of white posters was the dazzling light of the sun. There was a crowd gathered on the grounds, and I caught of glimpse of Chi-chan, who was pointing towards me. This was the first time I've seen her tie her hair behind her head.

Just as I was thinking that, the crowd suddenly turned their gaze in unison towards me as the speaker shouted, "Oh! Could that girl in casual clothing be the final Team Classics Club member? Will she make it?"

For some reason, the crowd began to applaud. It was at this moment that I realized what I was wearing. That's right, I was still in my cosplay attire...

I felt my body heating up. I really wanted to grumble. I don't want to do this dressed up like this! That does it, if it has to be like this, then it can't be helped.

I rushed towards the tournament venue to where Chi-chan was. Fuku-chan raised his arm and motioned towards a guy on the podium with a mic.

"Judge! As our member is late, we request permission to explain the situation to her!"

The guy looked a bit troubled, but then spoke through his mic.

"Keep it short," he said.

Fuku-chan probably had thought of keeping it organized beforehand as he began to speak quickly.

"There's rice being cooked in the pot on the right, it should be just about ready. There's pork miso soup in the pot on the left, all you need to do is

heat it up. As for the ingredients..."

Chi-chan looked as though she was about to cry... Has Fuku-chan been bullying her?

"I'm so sorry, Mayaka-san!"

" ...Besides the stuff left in the kitchen, you're only allowed to procure items within the school grounds. I'm really sorry you're always given the short end of the stick, but you'll have to figure out how to make something out of those. We're counting on you."

He gently pushed me from behind towards the makeshift kitchen.

I first took care of the rice. The fire was set on low, and the pot made a hissing sound due to the lid blocking the steam from getting out. I noticed a cloth nearby, so I stopped the fire, took out the lid and covered the pot with the cloth. This should take care of it for now. Now, what should I make?

" ..Eh?"

Ummm.

How should I say this? There's nothing except what you'd call trash. All I had was a radish and small pieces of chopped green onions. Onions and radish. ..What can I cook with that? Or fry it with?

Surrounded by the four makeshift kitchens was a basket in the centre of the ground. I could see a tube of wasabi in it. I though maybe there was something useful in it, so I dashed towards it to have a look.

...The only ingredient I could find was a shoddy-looking onion small enough to fit into the palm of my hand. Besides that was just a few blocks of ice... No matter how you look at it, there wasn't much.

On the other hand, I looked at the dishes we had made, and saw we had made quite a lot of amazing dishes. There's no way Fuku-chan could have made that, so it must have been Chi-chan. Wow. There's no way I could beat her. But the problem now is what dish I should make alongside all these impressive dishes. If I make something strange, Chi-chan's efforts would

have gone to waste.

A sliced radish, chopped pieces of green onion, and a shoddy-looking onion... What is this? Some sort of riddle? I remained motionless while staring at the chopping board. I now knew what Fuku-chan meant by me drawing the short-end of the stick. The commentary from the guy in the podium was getting quite irritating.

"Team Classics Club looks like they've come out of the frying pan and into the fire! They've run out of ingredients. If their last member is unable to submit anything, their entire score will be zero. Is this the end for Team Classics Club?"

What should I do?

...Just what can I make?

032 - ♠09

"Team Classics Club looks like they've come out of the frying pan and into the fire! They've run out of ingredients. If their last member is unable to submit anything, their entire score will be zero. Is this the end for Team Classics Club?"

Just what on earth are they doing anyway...

From the Geology Room on the fourth floor of the Special Block, I could see what was going on on the ground. Or rather, I could hear what was going on in the Wild Fire tournament. While I have no idea how a three-person team could manage to use up all their ingredients after the second member's turn, I did know that Team Classic Club's second member was a certain Chitanda Eru, so I was hardly surprised.

I muttered softly, "What're you gonna do?"

Saying that, I did not mean "What is Ibara going to do." Rather, it was whether I was going to swallow my pride and help Ibara out of her predicament, cover for Chitanda's error, and help out on Satoshi's promotion.

The answer was clear from the beginning.

No.

...Anyway, this is them fooling around. Moving from the window, I returned to my seat and began fiddling with the paperback that was so boring I stopped reading halfway.

[150 COPIES REMAINING]

033 - ♣11

Chitanda-san had undone her hair knot and reverted to her usual long flowing hairdo, and was now constantly whispering while looking at Mayaka.

"What is Mayaka-san going to do with these few ingredients? ...I'm *really* curious about it."

And just whose fault was it anyway?

But as this is Chitanda-san, I was unable to give her a proper retort.

Mayaka remained frozen on the spot. If it were me, I would have just taken the spring onion, radish and onion and fried them all together without giving it a second thought, but Mayaka would probably have none of that. She'd probably be thinking such a strange dish would merely be an eyesore in contrast to Chitanda-san's dishes.

While I wasn't particularly concerned with how the other teams were doing, I did take a glance at Team Fata Morgana, considering how Tani-kun seems to want to treat the Classics Club as his opponents. Taking the baton from the chef's son, it was now Tani-kun's turn to cook... Omelette rice? That's a pretty hard dish you've chosen, good luck there.

Mayaka simply stood before the makeshift kitchen with her arms crossed. If it were me I would have just raised my hand and surrendered, but Mayaka wasn't the sort to give up. And she's probably exhausted from the work with the Manga Club as well. The commentary boomed.

"It looks like Team Classics Club is out of their (...*TOSHI!*) wits. Only ten minutes now remain, is counting down the time all they can do now?"

Hmm? I thought I heard something from within the commentary. Was it calling for me?

Just when I thought I was imagining things, Chitanda-san, whose hearing was far superior to mine, began looking around her.

"I think I heard someone call out your name, Fukube-san."

"Huh? You think so too?"

"Team Astronomy Club's dish can no longer be called a dish from this world! As befitting of their name, even their dish seems to come from outer space! By cooking banana within a stew, an indescribable scent is emanating from their pot!"

Banana stew, sounds interesting, but.

"Excuse me, could you be quiet for a moment?"

The Cooking Club president frowned for a bit, but put down his mic and asked what the problem was. It was at this moment I could hear clearly.

"SATOSHI!"

It was Houtarou's voice, and it came from afar. But where?

"There! The club room!"

I turned my head around.

Following the direction Chitanda-san pointed, I saw the Geology Room on the fourth floor of the Special Block. And unbelievably, there was Houtarou waving his arms!

For Houtarou to actually bother to shout from out of the window to support us, that's unthinkable, as he would be the last person to do such a thing. Besides, Houtarou wasn't one to slowly attract the attention of more and more people.

"...What the...?"

"...Who's that?"

The crowd began to mutter.

"He seems to be beckoning you to come over, Fukube-san," Chitanda-san whispered.

Really? Hmm, from the look of it, it does seem like Houtarou is beckoning for me to come over rather than waving at me. He continued to shout.

"Satoshi! Come here! Right below!"

What would prompt the energy-saving Houtarou to go through so much trouble to do this?

Mayaka stared at the fourth floor with her mouth wide-open. For that Houtarou to call out to me, it must be something urgent.

It's a rare sight, but something must be up, so I said to Chitanda-san, "Well, since he called me over, guess I'll go have a look."

A hundred metres separate the makeshift kitchens at the grounds and the Special Block. Dashing towards there, I looked up and cupped my hands over my mouth.

"What's up?"

"Here, catch!"

Houtarou seemed to have something in his hand. Catch? Catch what? Without even time to think, Houtarou tossed something out of the window. Whoa! At least let me prepare...

I managed to catch a glimpse of something falling.

That said, it was difficult to judge the distance of something falling from right above you. As it fell from the fourth floor, it fell right into my arms at quite a considerable speed.

It was pretty heavy, but it was a nice catch, if I do say so myself. But what's this?

"...T-this is!"

Within my arms was something unbelievable. How on earth did Houtarou get his hands on this?

034 - ♦07

Fuku-chan came running back with a yellowish bag in his arms. And without saying anything, he tossed the bag over, which I instinctively caught. Is this what Oreki threw at him?

Where did Oreki get this? On the bag was written "weak flour."

Looking flustered after running all the way back, Fuku-chan gave me a thumbs-up gesture. The guy commentating on the podium shouted.

"An incredible development has occurred with Team Classics Club! It's true that you're allowed to procure ingredients within the school grounds, but for them to acquire wheat flour!"

The worrying can come later. Wheat flour, with spring onions, radish and onion, and then...

A completed picture flashed within my head, as well as the steps to get there.

Let's do this.

035 - ♣12

Mayaka began to move.

Pouring the flour into a bowl, she then filled it with water. She took some ice cubes from the basket in the centre and placed them into the bowl as well. She next began heating up the frying pan and poured oil into it. She cut the chopped spring onions into even lengths, as well as chopping up the round onion and shredding the radish with a shredder. She then began to fry something.

"Team Classics Club is now gathering the prawn heads that Chitanda took off a while ago. What is she planning to do with them?"

Sweet prawn heads... while they aren't exactly inedible, what's that got to do with the flour?

As I tilted my head in puzzlement, Chitanda-san quietly whispered, "...Kakiage."

That's it! Looking at the makeshift kitchen, Mayaka was indeed making kakiage.

Using these seemingly trash-like ingredients, Mayaka was able to make them shine. She had just breathed new life into this "trash" and given it a new name: "kakiage." Mayaka had basically just lectured us on how to never give up! This is not trash! Anyone is capable of shining! Long live Mayaka! In fact, we're all amazing! I felt as giddy as a grade school student.

Dipping the vegetables and prawn heads into the dissolved flour, she heated up the oil. However...

"You have five minutes remaining!"

Can she make it in time?

Mayaka seemed to be searching for something. What is it? She should be pouring oil over the kakiage by now.

After looking around the utensils tray, she glared at the president on the podium and shouted, "Hey, Cooking Club! At least prepare a ladle!"

Oh yeah, there didn't seem to be a ladle. It was really bothersome when I was making the pork miso soup, I had to make do with a spoon. The president frantically instructed one of his female members to go find one at once. The girl began looking around for a ladle. Hurry up! Any ladle would do, there's no time! In the end, she managed to borrow a ladle from another team that wasn't using it and handed it to Mayaka. Dammit, that's a minute gone!

Mayaka snatched the ladle from the girl and began pouring oil over the kakiage with it. A sizzling sound began to form as she did so. She next moved very swiftly, shredding the radish, heating up the pork soup and mixing the soy sauce with sweet wine before putting them into a bowl of rice... Rice?

"Team Classics Club is catching up really fast! Can they make it? One minute remaining!"

Perhaps feeling anxious because of the commentary, Mayaka kept looking at the pan of oil. The next few seconds were excruciatingly long and silent. And suddenly, the autumn sun was blocked by a pair of chopsticks, as she placed the kakiage on top of the bowl of rice and sprinkled the shredded radish on it.

"Come on!"

"Time's almost up!"

"You can do it!"

The audience cheered her on. Even they were fired up by Mayaka's persistence.

"Mayaka-san..."

Even Chitanda-san sounded tearful.

As expected of Mayaka. I'm so proud of you.

"Time's--up!"

Placing a final piece of topping, Mayaka had completed her kakiage bowl rice, and right on cue, the Wild Fire tournament came to an end.

I have no regrets. No matter what the result is, I have no regrets.

(Team Classics Club's dishes are as follows.
1st member - Fukube Satoshi: Pork miso soup.
2nd member - Chitanda Eru: Vinegar ginger radish roll, giseyaki, sweet prawn sashimi, imo-mochi.
3rd member - Ibara Mayaka: Kakiage bowl rice.)

036 - ♥08

Mayaka-san's skills brought us back from the jaws of defeat. Not only was she adept in the use of the knives, but to think of making kakiage at such a desperate situation was simply amazing. I then looked towards the fourth floor at the window of the Geology Room. I don't know how Oreki-san got his hands on the bag of flour, but he is a very perceptive person. Perhaps he is able to foresee events before they even happen. While I could not see him at the window, I still bowed towards his direction in gratitude.

Within the thunderous applause, Mayaka-san returned to her seat. The cute-looking beret hat on her head and the heart shaped brooch on her chest attracted a lot of attention. Yet despite her adorable appearance, Mayaka-san didn't seem too pleased.

Reminded of my own mistake, I felt like I should at least apologize to her, yet the first thing that came out of her mouth was, "It wasn't fried enough!"

"Well, it's not like we had the time to. It was still great, though."

Fukube-san tried to console her, but she did not seem satisfied

"There was no ladle! They've got shredders and peelers, so I thought they would also have a ladle. That's a minute wasted. If it wasn't for that, I could have fried it better. I'm such an idiot, I should have thought of using something else in place of a ladle during all that time!"

"I must sincerely apologize for that."

A person said while emerging from the side. It was The Cooking Club's president, who was commentating on the podium a while ago. While he maintained a comical personality on the podium, right now he was sincere as he apologized to Mayaka-san for the oversight.

"We did check to make sure we had all the utensils needed... We even doubled-check just before the tournament."

Fukube-san stood between them and mediated.

"Well, I did find it odd when I was making the pork miso soup. I should have raised this question when it was my turn, as I had more time then."

"...I guess so."

By saying that, it seems Mayaka-san has accepted the president's apology.

"But it's amazing for you to manage to fry something even under such conditions..." As the president continued the conversation, I decided to have a look at the makeshift kitchen, as I was feeling curious about why a utensil would be missing from the tournament itself.

The judges had begun sampling the dishes, and everyone's attention was on them now. After ingesting the Astronomy Club's greenish brown dish (or perhaps bamboo-coloured), one of the judges closed his eyes and leaned skyward. I don't think I would be curious about what that tasted like. While I do not quite agree with the quote "ignorance is bliss," I decided to be flexible for today at least.

The utensils were placed inside a cloth-covered tray. Inside were utensils which none of us had used neatly lined up next to one another, like bamboo skewers, lemon squeezers and barbecue spatulas. Yet a ladle ought to be one of the most basic kitchen utensils; was it be just a mere error?

It's not like I was expecting something, neither was I looking for any irregularities. I was simply lifting up the tray to have a look when,

"Oh!"

A greeting card. And under it was an opened copy of the pamphlet "Kanya Festival Guide." Where have I seen this before?

Could it be? Could it be?! I quickly turned around.

"Fukube-san! Mayaka-san!"

And shouted towards them both. By this time, the president had returned to the podium to continue with his duties.

"Hey, Chitanda-san, seems like that president really admires you."

Admire me? No way, but I hardly even know him. This would be troubling. No, more importantly,

"Take a look at this, under the tray."

"What's this?"

Mayaka-san casually picked up the card, yet upon taking a glance, her expression stiffened. Written on it were a series of words which I had expected to see:

"This is..."

Fukube-san's eyes began to sparkle. I instinctively spoke upon seeing the card.

"The same as the Fortune Telling Association!"

"The same as the Go Club!"

Eh?

My eyes met with Fukube-san's, which had widened. I probably looked just as startled as well.

Only Mayaka-san remained calm. The page which the opened copy of "Kanya Festival Guide" was showing was the page featuring the list of participating clubs, just like the one Kaho-san had shown me. The page which had the following "The Cooking Club - Cooking battle 'Wild Fire' on the School Grounds on Day 2 at 11am! Seeking participants."

Mayaka-san first looked at Fukube-san and then towards me and slowly said, "So, what's this all about?"

She asked what this was all about.

...So what was this all about?

I once again exchanged glances with Fukube-san.

3.3 - The "Juumoji" Incident

037 - ♠10

I opened my boxed lunch while listening to the Broadcast Club's live radio broadcast.

What kind of day is it today, you ask? I would say today was one of those days when my sis would decide to make my boxed lunch. I should really be giving my thanks for the food I'm receiving, but what's with this ethnic-looking dish comprised of spicy soybeans and fried chicken covered in yoghurt? The grains of rice in this Nasi Goreng[23] looked bigger than the rice I normally have. Where'd she get this from?

The door was closed during lunch time. This ethnic looking boxed lunch sure looked good. Guess I'll take my time enjoying this.

"Heya."

Opening the door, Satoshi walked in, followed by Chitanda and Ibara.

"Great work you did there, guys," I said, pointing upwards, or rather, towards the radio broadcast from the speakers.

A while ago, they were doing an interview with The Cooking Club.

"That sure was a high quality competition, wasn't it?"

"Yes, indeed. The results were that close. I thought the amberjack teriyaki, the main dish of Team Fata Morgana's second member would be most capable of winning. The same goes for his steamed clams, though as this is a school cultural festival, in place of steaming it with sake, he substituted rice wine, but still the taste was superb. Though he prepared them so early, that by the time the competition was over they became quite cool. This was where Team Classics Club made their comeback. The second member's giseyaki and imo-mochi were properly stored to be re-heated, while you could feel the heat from their third member's kakiage rice bowl so much that it looked as though that the prawn heads were crying. This heat was the

difference that decided their victory."

"And what about Team Astronomy Club?"

"They were in a world of their own."

Putting down my chopsticks, I spoke.

"Congratulations on winning."

By the way, something seems to have happened. As representing the winners to receive the prize, Ibara did not promote the Classics Club's name as she was supposed to, and to think Satoshi went through all this trouble to participate. At any rate, Satoshi was basically enjoying this more than promoting the club.

Despite being complimented, the three members were surprisingly apathetic to the radio broadcast.

"Thank you. It was thanks to Oreki-san's help. By the way, we have something to show you."

Chitanda spoke first. I have a really bad feeling about this.

"A-anyway, let's have lunch."

I prompted them to take their seats, which they duly did and slowly took out their own food... They've all bought bread from the school store. How unambitious.

Opening her bag of green bean paste bread, Chitanda turned around without even taking a bite.

"We have something to show you."

"Hmm? What is it?"

"This," She said and handed something to me. It looked like a greeting card. On it was written "The Cooking Club has lost its ladle." Signed by

"Juumoji."

"Hmm."

I took a bite of the spicy beans and said, "The ladles were stolen?"

"Yes... but just ours."

Ibara nodded. As Ibara had made the kakiage rice bowl, she was most affected by the theft. And to think she could have just made dumplings out of the flour I provided... Who would have thought she would fry something with it? She sure is a sensitive person.

"Probably a prank by someone with too much time on their hands."

I returned the greeting card, yet the conversation did not end there.

Munching on his red bean paste bread, Satoshi smiled and said, "It's not just The Cooking Club, the same happened to the Go Club as well. I hear the A Capella Club was also hit."

"The Fortune Telling Association, too. They both found this, um, declaration of crime with the same font."

I see.

"Looks like someone really has a lot of time on their hands."

I tried to downplay the incident, but Chitanda was not one to be fooled. Disregarding the green bean paste bread in her hands, she held her fists tightly. Chitanda's large black eyes, which betray her normally gentle image, were now widening. I could sense the atmosphere changing.

T-this is bad. Why now? Not even half a day had passed yet. And I was hoping to endure the Cultural Festival without incident. To think Chitanda had restrained herself well yesterday, how did it come to this? Where has it gone wrong? Once she makes her move, nobody could stop her. I knew very well when Chitanda Eru would start getting curious, a dark emotion that could kill cats.

Speaking one word at a time she said, "Just who would do such a thing during the Cultural Festival? Why would Juumoji-san commit such acts with such a name? Why would he steal these items one after another?"

She's about to say that line.

"I'm *really* curious about it."

Ah, she's said it. She has finally gone and said it.

...No wait, there's no reason to be scared. Ever since enrolling here, I have not been able to suppress her curiosity, but right now, I have a trump card.

Instead of wasting my time making excuses, I promptly showed my trump card.

"Now is not the time for that. What about our anthologies?"

Yet just as I had finished speaking, Satoshi spoke.

"What about those anthologies indeed. Even if we raise our name recognition by participating in these straightforward events, we're not gonna improve our sales anyway. I was prepared to accept that this was a futile exercise, so I just thought of something better."

"Something better?"

Satoshi's eyes were smiling, but that's his usual self. Though he seems to be serious about what he's about to say.

"This series of thefts, coupled with a signed declaration of crime — it's clear we're looking at a phantom thief incident. It's bound to get reported by the Wall Newspaper Club, and possibly broadcasted by the Broadcast Club tomorrow. If we go along this line of thinking, even if we don't sell out, we'll still be able to look forward to selling up to thirty to forty copies."

...I see. It's not so bad if that's the case. Indeed, this is certainly a newsworthy topic. Satoshi's mic appeal yesterday yielded some results, so if we could get the two media clubs to work for us, it's possible to sell up to thirty or forty copies. However,

"How are we going to improve our sales in the first place anyway? This incident has got nothing to do with the Classics Club."

"Oh, I know,"

Ibara interrupted, "We have Oreki."

"Yup. Just as with the 'Hyouka' incident or the 'Empress' incident, Houtarou certainly performed well in both."

Wait a sec, I know where this conversation is going, but wait a sec.
"Huh? What do you mean?"

Chitanda was a bit slow in getting their meaning. Satoshi explained with a mischievous smile.

"In other words, 'To find out how Oreki Houtaou, the Classic Club's super sleuth, manages to bring the harbinger of the Cultural Festival Juumonji to justice, read all about it in this "Hyouka," the Classics Club's anthology!' We could kill two birds with one stone by capturing Juumonji and promoting the Classic Club's name."

"I-I see! This is an excellent idea! I should hurry up and..."

Argh! I smacked my chopsticks onto the table.

"Don't be ridiculous! I'm not playing along with your games!"

I yelled. How can they toy around with people like that?

Yet, in contrast to my expectations, Satoshi surprisingly nodded in agreement that he was fooling around.

"You're right. I want to improve the sales, but it's probably not good to have Houtarou be our clown."

So you do get it... That I'll be nothing but a circus clown in such a charade.

"Besides, this 'Juumonji' guy is just stealing randomly. What do you want me to say to him if we do catch him?"

"I dunno, I was thinking you'd come up with something."

Don't be ridiculous.

"Why do you think I would be the one to do such a thing... First of all, how many people do you think have entered and left the school grounds during the Cultural Festival? And that's aside from our nearly one thousand students."

The room went silent. I munched another mouthful of ethnic boxed lunch.

Unwrapping the layers on her bacon roll, Ibara sighed.

"I don't think Fuku-chan's idea was bad. While I think it's a bit mean to have Oreki do something, if we could somehow catch that phantom thief, we could involve the Classics Club in this."

She unwrapped another layer.

"...If only the Classics Club were targeted."

"Yeah."

I nodded. If that were to happen, people would gradually turn their attention to the Classics Club while following the phantom thief incident. But in that case, there was no need to even catch this "Juumonji."

Satoshi muttered, "...We could stage it..."

"REJECTED."

Ibara replied sharply, "It's too risky."

"I was only kidding."

"When Fuku-chan says it, it doesn't sound like you're kidding... But, really, what could we do?"

"Try not to think too much about it, your roll's about to become straight."

Despite my quip, Ibara didn't even glare back at me and unwrapped yet another layer on her roll. She twitched her brows hard. Though she had the strongest sense of responsibility amongst us, she was also the one who's contributed the least to the Classics Club during this time. She must have realized this as well.

"Is there a chance the Classics Club would be targeted?"
Holding the green bean paste bread in her hand, Chitanda asked.

"Satoshi, how many participating clubs are there?"

"Fifty-one. Not a small number if you're wishing to be targeted."

"Would the thief calling himself Juumonji-san choose his targets randomly?"

"You think he'd target the Classics Club if he were to choose in such a fashion?"

The possibility would be zero. If it's completely random, the odds of being targeted would be...

"...Which clubs have been targeted again?"

Satoshi replied instantly, "The Go Club, A Capella Club, The Cooking Club, and what was it? Ah, the Fortune Telling Association."

Our odds of being targeted would be forty-seven out of fifty-one. Even if it were completely random, the possibility percentage would be insanely low. As I'm the only person watching the stall for the club, if I were to go out to take a walk or go to the bathroom, it would make it easier for us to be targeted.

...Hmm?

Wait a moment, this sounds strange.

I stopped Chitanda, who looked as though she was about to say something to me, and asked Satoshi, "Sorry, can you repeat which clubs were targeted

again?"

"Sure, the Go Club, A Capella Club, Fortune Telling Association and The Cooking Club."

Hmm, could it be?
"In other words,"

I spoke cautiously, "The A Capella Club, the Go Club, the Fortune Telling Association, and The Cooking Club.

...Who else was targeted?"

Looking puzzled, Satoshi shook his head.

"Dunno, I've not heard of any."

Watching our conversation, Ibara began looking through the "Kanya Festival Guide" in her hands. It seems like she too had realized what I had. Searching via the gojuuon [24] directory for the club names at the front of the guide, she began listing some names.

"Film Club, Gardening Club, Drama Club, Sci-Fi Club."

"Yes, which of those four were hit?"

"Film Club, Gardening Club..."

Taking a deep breath, Satoshi yelled, "A.B.C.!"

"Eh? Eh? What do you mean?"

Chitanda was the only one who didn't get it.

Watching her squeeze her green bean paste bread to smithereens, I explained to her, "It is as you have wondered, he wouldn't have targeted the clubs randomly. It's all following a pattern, and a very simple one at that. The only reason we didn't realize it earlier was because the order in which we were told which clubs were targeted was mixed up. So, assuming the

Film Club was targeted, we have: The A Capella Club, Go Club, Fortune Telling Association, Film Club, and The Cooking Club."

"Ah!"

Chitanda covered her mouth.
"The gojuuon sequence!"

Meanwhile, Satoshi was doing the rounds, calling someone on his cell phone.

"...Yes, just want to know if you've got something stolen... No, it's not me! Honest! ...Hmm? A water gun? I see, thanks."

He hung up the call as the three of us looked on.

Then he said, "It was the Gardening Club. One of their water guns was stolen while they were away from the room."

"Water gun? Why would the Gardening Club have water guns?"

A sensible question from Ibara, which I answered at once.

"They were making sweet potatoes, so they needed to prepare water to put out the fire, and they decided to use water guns because it looked cool that way."

"O-Oreki! How on earth did you know that!?"

Well, I'm sorry that I have amazing levels of perception. But actually, it was thanks to the Glock 17 that I had obtained earlier on. Ibara continued to mutter.

"But wait a minute. In 'A.B.C.,' it started with a person whose name starts with the letter A murdered in a place also starting with the letter A."

The only person here most likely to have read Agatha Christie's "The A.B.C. Murders" was probably Ibara.

"The Cooking Club had their ladle stolen, right?"

"Just wait a moment."

Stopping Ibara from going frantic, Satoshi took out a notebook and pen from the drawstring bag he always carries with him.

"Chitanda-san, what was it that was stolen from the Fortune Telling Association?"

"It's the 'Wheel of Fortune.'"

"OK!"

He began scribbling with his pen.

*** A Capella Club ([A]KAPERA BU アカペラ部) - (Drink)**
*** Go Club ([I]GO BU 囲碁部) - (Go Stones)**
*** Fortune Telling Association ([U]RANAI KEN 占い研) - Wheel of Fortune ([U]NMEI NO WA運命の輪)**
*** Gardening Club ([E]NGEI BU 園芸部) - (Water Gun)**
*** The Cooking Club ([O] RYOURI KEN お料理研) - Ladle ([O]TAMA おたま)**

I see.

"Hmm. I've not seen their declaration of crime cards, but isn't this stretching it a bit?"

Satoshi tilted his head.

Feeling skeptical myself, I said, "Maybe the Gardening Club had their AK (**[E]-KEI エーケイ**) stolen?"

"AK? What's that?"

"Their water gun, it's shaped like a Kalashnikov rifle."

"Really? I'll have to call the Gardening Club to confirm this."

"In that case, for the Go Club, they would have had their 'stones' (**[I]SHI** 石) stolen."

Indeed, no one objected to such a hypothesis.

As for the A Capella Club, "The A Capella Club would be..."

"Hmm..... Awamori **([A]WAMORI 泡盛)**? [25] Hot sake **([A]TSUKAN 熱燗)**?"

"It wouldn't matter as long as we could confirm the item starts with an [A]. We shouldn't think too much on that."

This... Wouldn't this be the excellent chance that the Classics Club would wish for? This was not me forsaking my energy-saving lifestyle. As usual, if there's something that I don't have to do, I won't do it. But if I let this pass, wouldn't it be too much of a pity? Even I was feeling a bit excited by the dawn of such luck.

"But, how far will this 'Juumonji-san' go with his crimes?"

How can you be so carefree, Chitanda!?

"Yeah, that's a problem."

"It won't be a problem as long as he stops by the Classics Club."

...Do even Satoshi and Ibara not get it as well?

I raised my voice.

"What are you guys talking about? What does the culprit call himself again?"

"Eh? Isn't it Juumonji?"

"I don't know why you guys pronounce it as 'Juumonji', when normally you would pronounce it as 'Juumoji.'"

"...Well, that's because I have a friend called Juumonji Kaho..."

"Oh!" Ibara exclaimed.

"That's it! Juumoji (Ten Characters 十文字)! Since Chi-chan and Fuku-chan kept pronouncing it as 'Juumonji,' I didn't see the association! If it's 'Juumoji' (Ten Characters), then that would make The Cooking Club the fifth character."

Exactly.

"And the sixth target would start with [KA], in other words, the tenth and final target would start with [KO]... That's more than enough reason to get people to come visit the Classics Club (**[KO]TENBU** 古典部), isn't it?"

[148 COPIES REMAINING]

038 - ♥09

While I believe Fukube-san and Mayaka-san are both wonderful people, there's one thing I don't agree with them about.

They make too much fun of Oreki-san.

He gets called dullish, a slacker, oversleeper, lazy, good-for-nothing, loiterer, too lazy to even loiter, a lion that sleeps all day, not a even a lion even if he sleeps all day, the antithesis of Labour Thanksgiving Day, sluggish, and all other sorts of bad names.

For me, if I see something I don't understand, I would seek out its answer. If I see something that looks out of place, I would spot it. But while I often get praised for being able to answer any problem being asked, I do not find myself matching that description. For some of the incredible things that I have come across, I was not able to find the answer to half of them. This would be like how rice cannot be grown by just merely preparing soil, water and seeds alone, part of being a rice farmer is to oversee how they're grown properly. Oreki-san was able to find the key to the questions that I did not understand, and obtain the answers which I had never thought about. He helped massively in the "Hyouka" incident, as named by Fukube-san, as well as come up with an amazing theory in the "Empress" incident.

He wasn't just a bright person. In contrast to what he himself normally claims, that he couldn't be bothered to help other people if it is too troubling for him, I believe he is actually a passionate and warm person deep inside.

Then again, I realize I've been relying too much on that warmth of his. That's why I tell myself I shouldn't rely too much on him...

With the new vision and possibilities shown to me by Oreki-san, I now head once again to the Wall Newspaper Club room. Based on the "pattern" that Oreki-san had spoke of, it would certainly attract the attention of the Wall Newspaper Club. Yet, whether I could convey this message to them to get them moving would depend on how I negotiate with them. I am no longer

overwhelmed by the colourful decorations of the Cultural Festival, the incessant chattering of the students and the various posters pasted everywhere. Instead, courtesy of Irisu-san's advice, my heart was filled with the confidence that this time I will not fail.

According to Fukube-san, it seems the "Juumoji" incident has yet to receive much attention, which means this story would be extremely newsworthy for the Wall Newspaper Club. This would be the sort of request where, based on Irisu-san's advice, I do not need to repay any favour.

I recalled what was being taught, as my sense of memory is one of the few things that I'm confident of. Important requests, give them expectations, make them think our problem is trivial, and make the request alone to a person of the opposite gender.
As to why these methods would be effective, I'm still at a loss in understanding them... It feels bad for me to use systems which I do not fully understand as mere tools, but I can't afford to be picky.

Making good use of that advice, I rehearsed my lines. To make sure I don't say anything wrong, I repeated them again and again on my own.

I arrived before the Wall Newspaper Club room, the Biology Lecture Room, and knocked on the closed door,

"Comin~!"

A hoarse voice replied as the door opened startlingly.

There were six people inside, which was more than yesterday. But that was not the only thing that was different. While Toogaito-san was amongst them, the other five people were all speaking on their cell phones. One of them finished speaking and spoke to another male student who was on the phone.

"Cooking Club. Confirm it with their president."

The student who heard the instruction made a circle with his finger. Was it money? ...Oh, he was making an OK sign. The student who just finished speaking on the phone wrote some sort of list before heading out of the

room, seemingly not noticing my presence.

It was then that a voice spoke.

"Sorry about that, Chitanda-san. We're a bit busy at the moment."

Before noticing, Toogaito-san had started walking towards me. After being mesmerized by the passion of the Wall Newspaper Club, I quickly returned to my senses.

"Try coming back some other time."

"Yes, sorry to be troubling you..."

No! I mustn't! I quickly stopped what I was saying. We haven't got much time ourselves. If I give up so soon, I wouldn't be able to face Oreki-san. I should at least convey my message,

"...Sorry to be troubling you, but, could you please take a moment? I have something to tell you."

While it's an unreasonable request, Toogaito said with a troubled expression, "All right, make it quick."

He seems to have accepted the request. I should be bowing to him in gratitude, but as he's in a hurry, I have decided to omit that.

It was then that I remembered. Toogaito-san is a member of the opposite gender. As there were other members present, I gradually took a few steps back away from the Biology Room. Perhaps unconsciously, Toogaito-san stepped forward in tandem towards the corridor. I then inadvertently closed the door. During the Cultural Festival, there was virtually no one around the Biology Room on the third floor of the Special Block besides us.

I've managed to adhere to one point of Irisu-san's advice now. To ensure I didn't fail, I suppressed my nervousness and spoke,

"It's about the Classics Club."

"Like I said, we'll only consider it if it's newsworthy."

"Well, umm, it *is* newsworthy."

Now, to make an expectation out of him. I think I should say it like this:

"It's something that we can only tell the Wall Newspaper Club."

"Hmm?"

Toogaito-san, who had originally wanted the conversation to end quickly, suddenly had a change in his attitude.

"What do you mean?"
"It's like this,"

I took a quick breath.

"We've discovered that during the Cultural Festival, many clubs have had various items stolen."

I had wanted to go on, but Toogaito-san's reaction was vigorous.

"'Juumoji!'"

"Eh?"

"What do you know about 'Juumoji?!'"

I was at a loss in how to deal with this sudden, unexpected turn of events. Umm, how should I respond? It's a bad habit of mine to suddenly stop speaking in times like these, even Oreki-san had told me about it. I must calm down, in other words, I must try and figure out what's going on so far...

Toogaito-san, or rather the Wall Newspaper Club, has already figured out something about the "Juumoji" incident, and they're extremely interested in it... Rather than a favour that's not expected to be repaid, this has now become a request where the favour is expected to be repaid.

W-what should I do?

No, this shouldn't change what I should be telling him. I nodded and tried my best to calm down, before compiling my thoughts into words.

I explained everything.

From beginning to end.

Toogaito-san looked very intrigued in what I had said and was extremely pleased.
"I see... The gojuuon sequence, huh? Now it makes sense, The Cooking Club's official name starts with [O]. And the Fortune Telling Association was hit as well... So that's why."

I was a bit curious on what he meant by the end.

"Umm, did you figure something out?"

"Oh."

Toogaito-san had a bitter look on his face.

"This is the Wall Newspaper Club after all,"

"Yes."

I nodded.

Toogaito then repeated again in a different tone, "The Wall Newspaper Club (**[KA]BESHINBUN BU** 壁新聞部), starts with a [KA]."

"Oh! So that means,"

"We lost out cutter knife (**[KA]TTA-NAIFU** カッターナイフ), it happened when we were all out."

"And that's why you're all so busy now?"

Toogaito-san nodded.

"While it's vexing that we had something stolen from us, it's this sort of accidental incident that we most look forward to. This is way more interesting than the usual stuff that we have to report on, isn't it? You've really saved us a lot of trouble. Who would have thought this 'Juumoji' would work in such a way?"

He then added a compliment.

"Good work for figuring that out."

"Oh, yes, that was mainly Oreki-san."

Yet, upon mentioning Oreki-san's name, for some reason Toogaito-san's smile was a mix between delight and vexation.

"...Ah, of course. Anyway, give him my thanks."

"Okay."

"Well, thanks for the information."

With a cheerful expression, I watched as Toogaito-san returned to the Biology Room.

It was when he was about to shut the door that I remembered Irisu-san's advice - "For situations where you're dealing with strangers which you would not deal with again after you receive the favour, in nine out of ten cases, they would consider your request a rip-off."

Wait! Please write something about the Classics Club in return!

I should have shouted that to Toogaito-san... but I couldn't do it. I couldn't make myself say something that sounds like I do not trust Toogaito-san.

"....."

I looked at the hand which I stretched out to call Toogaito-san. For a

moment, I felt depressed at failing once again.

However.

After thinking again calmly, this could turn out for be best. Irisu-san's advice on that was mainly for strangers whom I won't deal with again. But that's not the case for Toogaito-san. So if I were to build on a trust with Toogaito-san, then what I did wasn't wrong.

Yes, that's got to be the case.

...For a bit, I felt more resolute in my determination.

039 - ♣13

I first knew of Houtarou's amazing sense of perception in the "Hyouka" incident. Despite spending all that time with him in junior high, I never knew he was capable of such feats.

Knowing Houtarou's special abilities, I was full of expectations during the "Empress" affair, as I could not think of anyone else besides him who could pull it off. The very least I could do was give him my support. Though he was also active in other incidents, these were the two main ones that came to mind.

However, this time, I do not expect anything from Houtarou.

As he is in charge of watching the stall, he is unable to leave the Geology Room. Knowing Houtarou's motto, he would surely enjoy not needing to move around, but it also means he would be unable to solve anything, as much footwork is required for this case. In other words, Houtarou is unsuited for the "Juumoji" incident.

And what happens when I don't have any expectations from Houtarou?

...That leaves me with no choice but to do the investigation myself.

Using Houtarou's deductions as a basis, and padding it up with information I gleamed from various connections, I've managed to compile the following data.

Day 1
*** ~11:30am - A Capella Club ([A]KAPERA BU アカペラ部) - "Aquarius" ([A]KUARIASU アクエリアス) soft drink stolen**
*** ~12:30pm? - Go Club ([I]GO BU 囲碁部) - Stones ([I]SHI 石)(?) stolen**
*** Just after 2:00pm - Fortune Telling Association ([U]RANAI KENKYUU KAI 占い研究会) - Wheel of Fortune ([U]NMEI NO WA 運命の輪) stolen**

Day 2
*** ~9:00am - Gardening Club ([E]NGEI BU 園芸部) - AK ([E]-KEI エーケイ) (Kalashnikov water gun) stolen**
*** Just before 11:30am - The Cooking Club ([O]RYOURI KENKYUU KAI お料理研究会) - Ladle ([O]TAMA おたま) stolen**

And from Chitanda-san, who just returned dashing down the corridor, just a moment ago (currently it's 1:58pm), the Wall Newspaper Club ([KA]BESHINBUN BU 壁新聞部) has had their cutter knife ([KA]TTA-NAIFU カッターナイフ) stolen. The actual time when they were hit should be sometime earlier than this.

Roughly speaking, it would seem "Juumoji" seems to make his move every one and a half hour to two and a half hours. Considering the Cultural Festival takes place from 8:00am to 5:00pm, it makes sense.

As the Kamiyama High School Cultural Festival spans three days, if he were to steal from ten clubs, he would have divided them evenly, stealing from three the first day, three the second day, and four on the final day. However, while he has indeed targeted three clubs in the first day, as people would be preparing to take down their stuff on the final day from around three, it's possible that he could choose to target four clubs today.

Taking out my copy of the "Kanya Festival Guide," I started looking up the clubs whose names begin with [KI]... Heh, looks like the phantom thief is bound by the strange rules he has set for himself, as the only club that starts with [KI] is the Magic Club ([KI]JUTSU BU 奇術部).

Arriving at the Magic Club, there was a poster that read "The next show will begin at 2pm." This is most ideal. If he were to commit the crime, he would have to do so right before everyone's gazes. And even if "Juumoji" manages to pull this off and steal something that starts with [KI], there should still be some clues left behind.

If I stay vigilant, I have a fair chance of victory. "Juumoji"'s defeat lies with his pattern being too easy to read. The only problem with catching "Juumoji" now would mean he's denied the chance to go all the way to

[KO], which would be bad for our attempt to promote the Classics Club. Anyway, if we catch him, we still might be able to achieve something out of it.

I'm not like Houtarou. I am unable to untie the knots of a rope, neither am I able to just cut them loose quickly. If I could, even I would be amazed at myself.

However, I am at least able to move my body around, just by walking on my two feet and seeing with my two eyes, I should be able to figure something out.

The Magic Club public performance takes place in Class 2D's classroom. As a regular classroom, it has two entrances. The front door was covered by a curtain, with a cardboard box placed outside that read "Magic Club Backstage. No Trespassers Allowed." Visitors are to enter via the back door. Beside the back door was a table with a white box placed on it. Taking a closer look, it turns out it contains the programme booklets for the show.

As there was nothing else to do while waiting thirty minutes for the show to start, I bought one booklet.

1. Introduction
2. Living Dead - Takamura Youichi (1st Year)
3. The Rainbow Ring - Nagai Kaori (1st Year)
4. Vanishing Act - Tayama Kazuya (2nd Year)
5. Closeup Card Magic - Takamura Youichi and Nagai Kaori (1st Year)
6. Bowls and Balls - Tayama Kazuya (2nd Year)
7. Closing

I see.

The first thing I understood was that the Magic Club only has three members. The Classics Club has four while the Sewing Club has five. Hey, we have more.

"Living Dead" would be referring to zombies. As this is the Magic Club, they're no doubt referring to the zombie ball. "Rainbow Ring" would be linking rings, where they'd be playing with the illusion of the rings linking and separating. "Vanishing Act" probably involves something disappearing and being replaced with something else. "Closeup Card Magic" is like its name suggests, a straightforward performance. Should be interesting as there are two performers. "Bowls and Balls" is probably a variation of the cups and balls trick, where the audience is tricked into thinking the ball entered one cup when it instead ended up in another, this time they seem to be using bowls instead.

There doesn't seem to be anything within sight that starts with [KI]. Though there are the Kings ([KI]NGU キング) from the deck of cards, if they're going to use coins, then gold coins ([KI]NKA 金貨). If diacritics[26] are allowed for the [KI] spelling, then silver coins ([GI]NKA 銀貨) would do as well... But wait, that's technically impossible. (A 1 yen coin is made of aluminum, 5 yen is brass, 10 yen is bronze, and the rest are nickel coins. Oh, there's also the 500 yen coin, which is a mixture of brass and nickel, I guess?)

I wondered if I should take a peek inside, as I placed my hand on the door handle. I'd better not, while it might help in catching the phantom thief Juumoji, it's too unrefined of me to peek into the Magic Club's backstage. Besides, as long as I just stand here, I would easily see if anyone went in or out.

As I looked at my own notes, I immersed myself in enjoying this unexpected turn of events. While seeking out knowledge at my own pace is also fun in itself, I relish in these kinds of unforeseen incidents. Then again, based on my own experiences, sadly speaking, it would seem my wits, which are required in such a case, are by no means superior to the rest. In

essence, I am unable to deal with such sudden situations with a calm head, but this time I have prepared sufficiently in terms of intel, so I should be able to do something about it.

I killed time while going along such thoughts.

"Hmm? Why, if it isn't Fukube," said a surprised sounding voice. It was Tani-kun, with his firm jaw and round nose.

"You did rather well in the Wild Fire tournament."

That reminds me, we did beat his team during the cooking tournament. Upon discovering the declaration of crime, we'd totally forgotten about our duel.

I smiled and said, "Well, it's thanks to my pork miso soup, after all. My teammates also worked their best as a result, making my work look rather incomplete though."

"Team competitions sure are tough. I should have stuck with individual tournaments. Those two girls were incredible, even Suhara was amazed."

"Though I don't feel like I've won, as there weren't many participants. We were just lucky."

"By the way..."

Tani-kun turned his gaze towards my hand, which held the list of targeted clubs and items stolen. I subtly hid it away from sight.

"So have you heard?"

"Heard what?"

Tani-kun then turned his sights towards the Magic Club's billboard. I pondered on the possibiliies of why I would bump into him here.

Just as I wondered if I should confirm that possibility with him, he began to puff his chest and said, "The guy known as 'Juumoji.'"

Bingo. I nodded and shrugged my shoulders.

"As expected of Tani-kun, no rumour ever escapes your attention."

I had meant that as a compliment, yet Tani-kun didn't look too pleased.

"Oh, so you do know."

"That's why I'm here."

"Well, it is you guys that discovered the crime note at the Cooking Club, so it's not surprising that you already knew... But how did you end up figuring out it's the Magic Club?"

"It was easy of course, we followed the gojuuon pattern."

With an intrigued smile, Tani-kun said, "...Interesting. I was right to expect something of you."

Why thank you.

Predicting what his next line would be, I decided to move pre-emptively.

"So, what will our next duel be?"

"Oh, so you're up to it?" Tani-kun said and smiled.

Then he lowered his voice.

"Anyway, to show my fairness... I can tell you that the Wall Newspaper Club has been hit."

I knew that already, you didn't really need to tell me. Though I shouldn't ridicule him for it, less it complicates things.

However.

"It seems the Wall Newspaper Club's now fired up. Their next edition headline will feature the Juumoji story. Seems like they're doing a manhunt for 'Juumoji' with rewards."

Now I didn't know that, so I said with genuine concern, "Oh? Rewards, eh?"

"Details for the rewards will be included in their Special Edition No. 1... Once this becomes public, it'll attract a great deal of attention."

"You bet."

"Everyone is hungry for something unexpected. At any rate, this will become the main talking point for tomorrow."

For me personally, who prefers to enjoy stuff alone, this was rather bad news. Having Tani-kun involved was already a kill-joy, but main talking point? Give me a break. Yet for the Classics Club, in need of some PR to promote themselves, this was good news. If the "Juumoji" incident were to get more and more exciting, attention would eventually be turned towards the Classics Club. As to which aspect I should place more importance on... Guess I should prioritize making Mayaka smile once again.

Placing his hand on my shoulder, Tani-kun smiled.

"Well, it's impressive that you were able to get wind of this so quickly. Sorry, but I'll be the one to catch this guy. I may not look it, but I'm quite the mystery fan, you know?"

Oh, really? While that was what I thought, I maintained my smiling expression.

"Do go easy on us,"

I gave him a polite response, to which he nodded.

"Good luck to us both then, Fukube!"

While I would prefer to slowly enjoy my lunch as an excuse to stay with the Classics Club as long as possible, I know this can't last. No matter how unpleasant it is, I need to return to the Manga Club soon.

Without noticing, I had already unwrapped and torn my bacon roll into bits, and I now slowly picked them up one by one and fed them to my mouth. I'll go once I'm finished with them all. Just when I'd decided to do that, Oreki, who was in charge of watching the stall, opened his mouth.

"Ibara, you said you've read Agatha Christie's novels before, right?"

I was just about to wonder how he knew that when I remembered that I had told him near the end of the summer holidays, during what Fuku-chan called the "Empress" affair.

I stopped picking up the bacon roll pieces and said, "I did, but only her most famous works. It's not like I've read all of her works."

"And *The A.B.C. Murders* is one of them?"

"Of course."

Crossing his arms, Oreki sat back deeply into his chair while brazenly staring at the ceiling and said, "This 'Juumonji' incident, Satoshi said it's similar to A.B.C. .."

It was only just a while ago that Oreki was telling us off for mispronouncing "Juumoji," and now he's pronouncing it as "Juumonji." Though as a person's name, it is indeed easier to pronounce it as "Juumonji," so I didn't say anything.

"Somehow, it's easy to make the association. Since *The A.B.C. Murders* involve victims being left with an 'A.B.C. list,' then it's natural that he would make the association with the 'Kanya Festival Guides' that were left at the crime scenes."

"Well, of course. Or there wouldn't be much meaning to it."

"By the way,"

Moving his gaze down from the ceiling, Oreki looked as though he was about to say something bad.

"Just asking, but what's the reason the killer in *A.B.C.* kills his victims in alphabetical order?"

...What a strange question.

"Oreki, have you even read *The A.B.C. Murders*?"

"Nope, just the premise."

"Premise, huh? So, do you intend to read it in the future?"

"...Dunno."

"Are you sure you still want to know even then? It'll spoil the story for you, are you okay with that?"

Thinking for a bit, Oreki met my gaze.

"Sure, go ahead."

Fine then.

Just to be safe, I had a look around. Because if someone were to hear all the plot details of *A.B.C.* before reading it, it would definitely ruin the story for them.

After making sure no one was around, I sighed.

"Well, it's actually quite straightforward. Wouldn't you already be thinking

the killer simply wants to kill in alphabetical order?"

Oreki gave a bitter smile.

"Yeah, I guess."

Jeez. That's the problem with him, he would often change his mind just when he's about to say something. I began to speak harshly.

"In other words, you were thinking 'Juumoji' had simply wanted to steal according to the gojuuon sequence, weren't you?"

"...Yeah."

Oreki answered and sat upright with an unpleasant looking face.

"I don't know if 'Juumonji' was aware of Christie when he committed his crimes, but what has he stolen? Go stones and ladles, they're nothing but trinkets. Surely he wouldn't really want to steal those.

"But does that mean he's simply a prankster stealing in the gojuuon sequence just for fun?"

"So you're saying there's another meaning to all this?"

I took another piece of bread roll and stuffed it into my mouth.

"When Satoshi and Chitanda both heard that 'Juumonji' works according to the gojuuon sequence, they both ran out looking excited. To be blunt, just by observing the clues, anyone would have figured that out."

"It's true that you were the first to realize, but it's not like it's some big discovery in itself."

"In other words, this was no big deal to 'Juumonji' himself. If instead of the gojuuon sequence, he were to base his sequence on something more cryptic, for example taking the letters from the slogan 'Glory To Kami High,' then he would need to put more effort into it."

"I see. The gojuuon sequence just seems too easy to figure out."

I get what Oreki's trying to say. If 'Juumoji's' objective was merely to steal stuff following the gojuuon sequence, then this prankster is a bit weird in the head. But if that's not the case, then the gojuuon sequence is merely a process for him to achieve something else.

I did not realize this until I'd personally participated in the Cultural Festival, but it really is a unique moment. That uniqueness involves a sense of floating around in a carefree way, and it's not strange to see people getting moved along by strange pranks. But is that all?

...I think I'm becoming strange myself.

"Oreki, do you ever think of catching 'Juumoji' yourself?"

"Me?"

He looked surprised.

"Why would you think I'd do such a thing?"

"You look enthused."

Oreki snorted and went back to leaning on the back of his chair.

"It doesn't matter to me either way. Be it Juumoji (Ten Characters) or The Man with a Thousand Faces. If he wants to steal something from the Classics Club, I'll gladly give it to him as long as it's not my wallet. Though afterwards Chitanda would probably be very curious and would badger me about who 'Juumonji' was."

"Well, you could always just ignore her."

"She's not the sort of person you can just ignore."

Oreki frowned.

Hee hee.

How silly.

Tossing the last bits of bread roll into my mouth, I stood up. As I proceeded to move, I thought I should give my thanks.

"That reminds me. Oreki, thanks for the bag of flour. I was really at a loss back there."

"Oh. Don't mention it."

As though remembering something, Oreki gave an enigmatic smile.

"I got that bag of flour via the straw millionaire protocol."

Straw millionaire protocol?

"What're you talking about?"

"The story of the straw millionaire, you know?"

Oh, I see.

"So you want something in exchange for the bag of flour, is that right?"

"You got something? If you don't, then I don't mind ending my protocol here."

Oh, well.

After thinking for a bit, I took off the brooch on my chest.
"You can have this."

Oreki looked on in surprise.

"...Are you sure? Don't you need it for your cospl—"

"It's not a cosplay, you idiot!"

I threw the brooch at Oreki's face as hard as I could and quickly turned and left the Geology Room.

041 - ♣14

I had intended to keep monitoring any movement near the backstage entrance, but I cannot resist the call of nature. As the show was about to start, I quickly went for the bathroom. When I came back, I asked Tani-kun whether he saw anyone suspicious. Though he admonished me for having the audacity to ask a rival, it helped stroked his ego a bit as he answered kindly.

"Nobody came or went."

As he answered, someone emerged from the Class 2-D classroom. It was a male student, and the badge on his collar indicated he was a second year. That would be the Magic Club president Tayama. (It's not like I knew who he was, I just happened to read it in the programme booklet.) He raised his voice across the corridor filled with flags and lanterns and all sorts of decorations.

"The fifth Magic Club show will commence shortly."

Without saying anything, both Tani-kun and I entered the dark classroom. It seemed like even the windows were draped in black curtains. The classroom itself was partitioned into two parts, with a curtain separating the two sides. The tables were all stacked along the windows while the chairs were lined up in rows. Behind the curtain would be the backstage. Right before the curtain was the podium and teacher's table. That would be the stage. The spacing between the spectators' seating and the stage was quite narrow, which could be a bit tough for the performer but would provide a great view for the spectator. But now's not the time for me to enjoy myself.

I next looked at the people entering the spectators' seating.

As this was the fifth performance, most people with an interest in conjuring tricks would have already seen it, so there weren't many people coming in. The first person I saw coming in was someone I didn't expect. When silent, she would exude a cool aura, and when she spoke, it was as regally as an "Empress." I stood up without thinking.

"Oh, hello there, Irisu-sempai."

Irisu Fuyumi-sempai squinted her eyes in the dark to see who was speaking to her.

"...Oh, you're from the Classics Club."

She nodded and greeted me back before sitting on one of the chairs in the last row. It feels a bit strange seeing the extremely rational Irisu-sempai coming to watch a magic show.

The next person to come in was also a girl, who brought another girl with her. At first I thought they were a couple, as one of them was dressed like a man. I remember seeing that tuxedo before... That's right, she's with the Manga Club. She was with Mayaka when they were drawing the posters. In that case, the girl besides her would be the Manga Club president, whom I've seen a few times. Both chatted and pointed to their programme booklets while taking the seats in front.

Next came various people whom I did not know. Though we may study in the same school, I'm familiar with their faces, but it's not like I'm acquainted with them. As for visitors from outside the school, there was a middle-aged couple, even though today was a working day. Wondering what was going on, a grade-school-looking little girl entered as well looking curious.

The girl who entered next was a classmate of mine, though as I don't know her really well, I didn't call out to her. She must've noticed my presence, though she decided not to call out to me either. Come to think of it, her surname happens to be "Juumonji," Juumonji Kaho-san. As a member of the "Four Exponential Clans," I would most like to get to know her, but I find it quite hard to deal with her. (As for what I meant by "getting to know her," it simply means I'd like to ask her about stuff that I've not heard before, that's all. Though I'd get myself in a lot of trouble if Mayaka were to hear me say that.)

While there weren't many people in the beginning, in time the room was now quite packed. The Magic Club should be quite pleased with this attendance. The president from before could be seen taking a peek through the curtain.

Next came a group of guys. Whoa, if it isn't the president of the Executive Committee Tanabe Jirou? And beside him was... Oh my god, it's the Nth President of the Kamiyama High School Student Council, His Excellency Kugayama Munetaka. ("Nth" means I have no idea how many presidents there were before him.) A charismatic figure with a sporty-looking figure and carefree smile, his moving speech still left an impression in my mind, though I have no idea what the president normally does. Besides those two, I'm not quite acquainted with the others. Noticing me, Tanabe-sempai raised his hand to greet me.

While the spectator seating that took up half of the classroom was not quite completely filled, it was still 70% full. A girl, presumably a Magic Club member, closed the door. The partition curtain opened, and a male student walked onto the stage carrying a candle stand in each hand, placing them on the teaching desk. Taking a match from his pocket, he began lighting the candles, which began to illuminate the dark classroom with a gentle light. I see, in order to deal with the confined spacing of the room, they resorted to using dim candle lighting to make the room look bigger. I began to be absorbed by the mood created.

After the guy who lit the candles withdrew, the president emerged. The president, with his hair combed back and wearing a pair of framed spectacles, was a slim figure with skillful-looking hands. He waited till the audience gradually went silent before smiling and bowed courteously like a stage actor.

"Let the show commence. Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to the Magic Club performance. Now feast your eyes upon the wonders that we have worked hard in order to show you."

Applause.

I looked around during the applause. There doesn't seem to be anything out of order so far...

"First, the Magic Club proudly presents Takamura Youichi of Class 1-B, who will be gracing us with his performance of 'The Living Dead.'"

He then withdrew from the stage amidst the applause. The male student that next emerged from the curtains was carrying a ball, as expected, as the El

Bimbo[27] began to be played in the background... As a French whisper pop, this kind of music suits the mood well. Takamura-kun seems totally relaxed. Now I know why they were proudly presenting him. Or perhaps it's because this is the fifth time he's performing this?

The zombie ball and linking rings performances went smoothly as expected.

The Magic Club people sure have some skill. While I've seen my fair share of conjuring tricks, this was nothing to be amazed at, but still, it was quite intense seeing the ball float in mid air or the rings linked together from such a close distance. And while the first guy and the girl that followed had a few awkward moments with their movements, it wasn't so bad as to jeopardize their performance. I applauded their mastery from the bottom of my heart.

The third act, "Vanishing Act," was just as impressive. Tayama-san, the Magic Club president and their sole second year, was certainly more skilled than his two members. He was just as composed during his performance as he was while greeting the audience, making cards and handkerchiefs appear seemingly out of nowhere as the background music played (this time it's some piano sonata, the name of which I've forgotten).

His card and handkerchief apparition acts, while skillful, were nothing to be astonished at, but, I was still a bit surprised when he suddenly made that black handkerchief appear out of his right hand near the end. It caused quite a stir with the audience, and even I was grappling at the edge of my seat.

Whether he was relieved at the success of his performance or pleased with the applause, the previously emotionless president Tayama gave a gentle smile. He then took out a pink candle, which was already alight. I'm not making this up, normally you wouldn't put a lit candle in your pocket, would you? Raising the candle for all to see, we all applauded in unison.

Seated some distance from me, Tani-kun whispered to me while applauding.

"Looks like he's got the torch."

I don't know why he's calling it a torch. Sure, it has other names like a flambeau, torchlight or rushlight, but wouldn't one normally call those candles? I had an urge to explain to him that torches were different from candles, but I decided not to.

No, wait, I've been so immersed in the show, I'd nearly forgotten I wasn't here to watch the performance. Yet, nothing out of the ordinary had happened with the magic show so far, and there were no strange movements amongst the audience either. Occasionally the door would open and one or two more visitors would enter or leave mid way, but there was nothing "Juumoji" could have stolen from the outside, as there's nothing but curtains, the billboard, and posters. Hmm, what was it that Juumoji was after again? Something that begins with [KI].

...CANDLE (**[KI]YANDORU** キャンドル)!

I gave out a gasp, and turned to look at president Tayama, who was sincerely thanking the audience. The candle in his hand was no longer lit. As it was probably dangerous, upon showing the lit candle to everyone, he had promptly blown it out. But that wasn't the only candle in the room. I turned to look at the candle stands used for illuminating the room.

"...AH!"

"Now, rather than the usual poker cards, this time we'll be playing with Japanese playing cards[28]... Huh?"

Oh crap, I gasped too loudly. As the following card magic involved interacting with the audience, there was no background music, and so Takamura-kun and Nagai-san, who were now performing, turned to look at me. I quickly waved my hands apologetically for interrupting them.

There were originally five candles on each candle stand. While the stand on the right still had five candles, the one on the left only had four!

They've been hit!

But when?! All this time no one had approached the stage, until now.

"And now, would the lady sitting at the back please come forward to the

stage?"

Irisu-san, being called upon, walked towards the stage. But before that, only the performers had appeared. Which means the missing candle was never there to begin with.

And all this time I was thinking that "Juumoji" would carry out his act under the gaze of this many people. Yet the act had already been carried out before the show even began.

Dammit, I've been wasting my time all along!

He must have left his declaration of crime somewhere. Come to think of it, the ladle wasn't stolen from The Cooking Club during the Wild Fire tournament itself. It was already gone before the tournament even began. The phantom thief "Juumoji" did not seem to carry out his thefts in a flashy way like most phantom thieves do.

Anyway, if it had come to this, there was no reason for me to stay anymore. If it had already been stolen beforehand, then it rules out the people here as suspects. All that's left is to...

"The card you've chosen is the Maple Deer, right?"

"...That's it!"

I clapped my hands.

I straightened myself up and watched on carefully.

042 - ♦09

Returning to the Manga Club, one of the first years with whom I'm friendly greeted me.

"You're late."

I smiled kindly in response and returned to my seat at the booth.

The posters drawn during the morning had some effect in drawing visitors, as they seem to have increased from yesterday.

I asked the girl sitting beside me in a low voice, "How is it? Compared to yesterday."

She took a look across the room, and it was then that I noticed Kouchi-sempai was here.
Making sure Kouchi-sempai was engaged with her followers and not looking over here, the girl replied in an even lower voice, "Well, there are more visitors."

"Is it because of the posters?"

"I'm not sure, but..."

Well, it's good if it helps sales. It's not like I was against Kouchi-sempai's proposal to draw posters to attract customers in the first place, but on the other hand, it's not like I'm pleased that my drawings had helped as well. Don't get the wrong idea.

However, while realizing I could be wrong, I still felt something was not right. As we giggled, someone from across the room began speaking to indicate that they heard us.

"See? We should have listened to sempai to begin with."

"Yeah, if it weren't for someone being against it, we would have sold more yesterday."

It's not like these people who've not even contributed to the anthologies have any right to complain, but I kept quiet.

"Oh, don't be so mean to her. To think she worked so hard to draw the posters."

"I guess. Well, good luck."

Though they said one thing, the tones of their voices revealed another meaning. To be more precise, they were saying "Oh, don't be *so* mean to her. To think *she* worked so hard to draw the posters," while throwing a glance at me, as though accusing me of having a victim's complex and saying "Serves you right."

I love manga, and if I had to choose, I would say I like the Manga Club as well. Though I did not wish for this to happen... but it can't be helped. There's three of them, and it's not in my nature to say anything unnecessary. Not to mention I was unable to present my evidence. So I need to hold back. But with such an atmosphere, there's no way I could ask the club to help sell *Hyouka*.

They continued their persistent whispering. They're really such pesky gossips. Speaking of gossips, this reminds me of a strange conversation I once had with Fuku-chan, when I once said he was like a gossip and he gave me an unbelievable response.

"You mean I'm brave?"

"Eh?"

"As well as being patriotic?"

"What're you talking about?"

"You said I'm like Kossuth[29]."

"...What the hell's that?"

"A Hungarian hero."

Seriously, what the hell's that??

Being reminded of how seriously silly Fuku-chan was then, I giggled. I know I shouldn't be laughing, but I still ended up doing it. As expected, the gossiping group suddenly stopped.

"What's with her?"

"Isn't she being a bit cocky?"

"Weird girl."

Well I'm sorry about that!

This group normally acts in unison, with each member being basically like the others, though this time one of them led the way by speaking louder than before.

"She was bluffing, wasn't she? To say she couldn't find it, as if anyone would believe that. And she was going on about how there are masterpiece mangas out there and was bragging about showing us one of them. Instead, she gives the name of some doujin no one's ever heard of, as though she's some expert on it. Besides, she..."

For them to go so far, even my patience was incredibly stretched to the point of bursting.

"Enough. You should keep your mouth shut about things you have no knowledge of."

A voice called out from across the room. The gossiping group turned their heads in a direction they never expected the voice would come from. They had no choice but to keep quiet, as the one who spoke was none other than their leader, Kouchi-sempai. Dressed in her tuxedo, Kouchi-sempai began yawning as though she hadn't even said those words.

I was quite surprised. But not at Kouchi-sempai reprimanding her followers. For Kouchi-sempai, as long as it was funny, it didn't matter whether a manga was fiction or non-fiction, parody or homage, so I thought

she would be the sort who wouldn't fuss whether things were fair or not. So I was really astonished when she of all people would tell people to shut up about things they are ignorant about.

The group of followers all cowered like a bunch of dogs who had just been scolded by their master. Though I could still feel their resentful gazes directed towards me.

This feels suffocating.

...Though I had only just arrived, I already felt like I needed a breath of fresh air. So I told the girl sitting next to me I needed to leave for a bit and stood up. I wish I could just flutter away like the wind.

The autumn sun was sinking quickly.

Though it wasn't yet evening, the sunlight was getting weaker and the wind was getting cooler. I stood along the roof of the connecting corridor, looking down towards the central garden, wondering if this place had been forgotten while the rest of Kamiyama High School has been decorated fully.

Till now, while I still think I wasn't wrong, I wondered if I should have kept silent.

But I didn't regret it, I think. I just couldn't stand by and watch Kouchi-sempai say that whether one think a manga is interesting or not was purely subjective. If what she said was true, then anyone can be an expert. While my art wasn't something I was ashamed of showing people, as I did draw the posters a while ago, the manga that I drew were just dull. I wanted to draw something more interesting, much, much more interesting. If I had not encountered *Ashes at Dusk*, I would have still believed myself to be capable of that. For Kouchi-sempai to say it was pointless to strive to improve one's work, it was as though she was describing the effort as walking in the dark. She said without a clear objective or target, no matter how much you've progressed, it still wouldn't make much of a difference. No matter how you brush up your skills, it still wouldn't change anything. If I had accepted those words, then why would I still be thinking my art isn't good enough?

...Yet I didn't give her those counter-arguments yesterday, as I thought showing her a copy of *Ashes at Dusk* would be good enough. But I didn't

consider whether she would be convinced by it, or whatever her followers might say afterwards.

Heh, I'm such an idiot.

...I feel like seeing Fuku-chan. He's probably engaged in some event like a fool somewhere. I too wanted to go investigate the "Juumoji" incident with him. I wonder if he would invite me. As a result of these thoughts, I still had not returned to the Manga Club.

"Ibara,"

A voice suddenly called out to me, so I turned to see who it was.

"I'm sorry that you had to go through all that."

It was President Yuasa, giving a concerned but gentle smile with her fluffy cheeks and double eyelids.

I quickly shook my head.

"Why are you apologizing? You've done nothing wrong, President."

"Well, that's because I've been quiet all this time. I wanted to stand by your side."

...To come all the way to the roof of the connecting corridor to tell me that, I wonder what my mind was going through then?

But, that's fine. It's not like I had wanted anybody on my side. And had she actually stood up for me, it would only worsen my conflict with Kouchi-sempai and cause turmoil within the Manga Club. That wouldn't be good. So it's fine.

"...Ayako doesn't really mean what she said," President Yuasa said as she stood alone.

As I was wondering who Ayako was, I realized she meant Kouchi-sempai, whose full name was Kouchi Ayako.

"What do you mean by her not meaning what she said? You mean her

saying we should keep quiet about things we have no knowledge of?"

"No, not that. I meant her argument with you yesterday."

It was a topic I did not want to go further into.

I took a deep sigh and said, "You mean her saying whether a manga is interesting or not depends on one's acceptance antenna?"
The president nodded softly.

Was she trying to console me? If she was, she wasn't doing quite a good job at it.

I gave a weak smile and asked, "How could you tell she didn't mean it?"

"Well... it's because Ayako and I are good friends."

"Is that all?"

"Ayako and Haruna are good friends as well."

President Yuasa smiled kindly, as though I would understand by now. I was probably looking dumbfounded like an idiot right now. Who's Haruna? She sure wasn't referring to Kouchi-sempai, and that wasn't President Yuasa's name either. I could not recall anyone I knew with that name. After an awkward pause, I decided to ask.

"Who's that?"

"Who's who?"

"This Haruna."

This time it was President Yuasa's turn to look perplexed. The way she tilted her head reminded me a bit of Chi-chan.

"Eh? But, Ibara, I thought you've read her work."

What work? Seeing I still haven't got a clue, she continued.

"You know, *Ashes at Dusk*?"

Hearing the name of the title I never thought would get mentioned during this conversation, I replied with a stiffened back.

"...Yeah."
"Haruna was its author. Anjou Haruna. Didn't she put her name on it?"

Eh?

I would have most certainly remembered who the author of *Ashes at Dusk* was. But, how should I say this, it was definitely not "Anjou Haruna." The author name for that doujinshi was a quite obscure sounding name, that I certainly remembered.

"I thought the author was someone called Anshinin?"

"Anshinin?"

"'Anshin' as in 'peace of mind,' 'In' as in 'hall.'"

President Yuasa looked a bit surprised, but then slowly shook her head.

"She must have used a pen-name then. But I know the story was penned by Haruna. I have no idea who drew the art, though Haruna should know."

I managed to learn more about the author of a manga I admire in the strangest of occasions.

While I knew that the script and artist were different people, for a moment, I had forgotten the depression that I was having and asked, "Which class is this person in?"

"Oh, Haruna is no longer here. She transferred to another school."

"...I-I see."

I tried to organize what the president had just told me... I didn't really get it, so I sighed softly.

"President, what did you mean when you said this Anjou Haruna was friends with Kouchi-sempai? And how did you realize Kouchi-sempai didn't mean what she said?"

The president looked downwards and went silent.

Could it be that she was quite cautious with her words? As I pondered such a question, she slowly raised her head.

"If you had spoken to Haruna, you might understand as well. I know this is not a good enough answer for you, but, I'm sorry Ibara, while I do know the answer, I'm not able to tell you."

"..."

"Because Ayako is my friend."

Her large eyes with her double eyelids looked lonely as she explained. *I can't tell you, because she's my friend.* If she had told me, she might feel that she was speaking ill of Kouchi-sempai... as well as revealing Kouchi-sempai's secrets.

In any case, as she couldn't tell me, I wouldn't understand. And right now, I realized I was going nowhere thinking about something I do not understand. I slowly shook my head.

I feel like being alone. Regardless of whether Kouchi-sempai really meant what she said, I just wanted to indulge in the breeze.

"Let me just enjoy the breeze for a bit before returning."

"Ibara..."

Once again, I said insistently, "I'll be back in just a bit."

So please leave me alone.

043 - ♠11

It was soon five o'clock.

Though everyone had returned just before the final chime, for some reason the mood seemed strange. Satoshi was unusually frowning for once. In contrast, Chitanda looked pleased. Ibara just looked downright depressed. As she probably doesn't wish for anyone to speak to her, I decided to ignore her for now.

"We've been outfoxed, Houtarou."

As Satoshi spoke, he suddenly stared at my face and asked puzzledly, "What happened to your eye?"

Is it still red?

"Oh, my eye got hit by a heart."

"Huh?"

"Like I said, my eye got hit by a heart."

Satoshi looked dumbfounded, but quickly regained his composure.

"Anyway, we were completely outfoxed. A candle was taken from the Magic Club."

"Isn't that good news?"

I said truthfully, "It wouldn't be good if 'Juumonji' was caught before he reached the Classics Club, would it?"

"Yeah, I guess."

Satoshi nodded grudgingly. Hearing his story, it seemed he had hoped to catch "Juumoji" red handed. Firstly, none of the items from [A] to [KA] had been stolen during events. Secondly, "Juumoji" wouldn't be so stupid as to pick an inconvenient time like during a performance to carry out his thefts. He would simply do so at a time of his convenience, regardless of whether

an event was ongoing or not.

"You could've told me that earlier..."
Satoshi grumbled. Hey, it's not like I knew what you were trying to do before.

"So? Did you find a declaration of crime?"

"Yeah, after looking around, we found it bundled along with a notice for tomorrow's first show at 10am, and sure enough, a copy of the *Kanya Festival Guide* was there as well."

"And you found that in the corridor?"

"Yeah."

This means the culprit could be anyone.

Meanwhile, Chitanda's cheek was twitching. Though she wanted to smile, upon seeing Ibara looking depressed, she obviously couldn't do so. I decided to break the tension.

"Seems like you found something good?"

Chitanda gave a big nod.

"Yes I did!"

"Really?"

"The twenty copies of *Hyouka* that I've given to Irisu-san are selling well."

I guess, since it is that Irisu. While it's something to rejoice about, I couldn't smile for some reason. I just hope she doesn't find use for me this time.

"So they're all sold out?"

"No, there are still a few copies left, but they'll most likely be sold out by tomorrow."

If they're all sold out, should we send another twenty copies over? That was the question.

"And there's more. The *Kami High Monthly Special Edition* that was released at 4pm mentioned the 'Juumoji' incident. It included the gojuuon rule that Oreki-san figured out."

I feel a bit embarrassed at being credited for such a deduction. As I've mentioned to Ibara, anyone could have figured that out.

Chitanda continued while placing her hand before her chest as though in prayer, "Besides, they've mentioned the Classics Club's name! Right here: *And so, our dear readers, it is speculated that 'Juumoji' will carry out his final crime sometime between noon and 2pm at either the Classics Club or the Miniature Club ([KO]USAKU BU* 工作部*).*"

"The Miniature Club? I didn't know we had such a club."

Satoshi nodded deeply as he replied, "We do, now that you mention it."

"If he went to that club, then all our plans will be wasted."

"Yes, I'm worried about that as well,"

Chitanda gradually withdrew her delighted expression as she said that. I was wondering why she was so happy just now when I realized it was she who had brought that newspaper from the Wall Newspaper Club over here. So she was happy that she gets to inform us of the news... No, that's not right. This wasn't something that would get her this happy, there must be something else to it. But I shouldn't be prying into the minds of others, especially not that of Chitanda Eru.

"...So, Houtarou, how many copies have we sold?"

Ah, that.

"Excluding the copies we've given Irisu-sempai, that would be sixteen copies."

"Hey, we're actually selling more than yesterday."

Yeah, but only marginally. Though we seem to have done better in our promotion today via the Wild Fire tournament than the Quiz Trial tournament yesterday. So there were more students who had decided to come over to this forsaken corner during their free time. We'll need all the word-of-mouth advertisement we can get.

At the end of the second day, our hope for selling out the remaining three quarters rests with how the "Juumoji" incident plays out...

Well, we'll worry about it then. I took out a bag of biscuits from the table drawer.

"Houtarou, what's that?"

"I bought them from the Confectionery Club. I've not eaten them yet, you can have some if you like."

As I called out, even Ibara had walked over.

The four of us divided up the bag of biscuits. As we munched on the biscuits, the chime signaling the end of the second day began ringing.

[141 COPIES REMAINING]

4 - Yet Another Sleepless Night

044 - ♥10

One must not say that one is tired, as that means passing on one's responsibilities to someone else, or so I'm told. If you are feeling tired, then you should say you need to take a rest, and then continue whatever it is you're doing once you've rested enough.

That was what my kind grandmother had taught me.

No, I should not use past tense. My grandmother is still alive and well.

I've never forgotten this piece of advice. But I guess it's fine since I'm whispering to myself alone in my room at night. Right now, I'm feeling a bit tired.

I've entrusted Irisu-san with helping us sell copies of the anthology, and I've also managed to have the Wall Newspaper Club give the Classics Club a mention in their report. So while it was not in vain, for some reason I felt weighed down by something upon returning to the club room.

I am not the type of person to be lethargic. While I'm not exactly a sporty person, I do have an above average record when it comes to running long distances. And for these last two days I've been walking all over the school grounds, so this was not the reason for my tiredness.

How should I say this... I don't become this tired when taking care of my own problems, but this time, I'm feeling a bit tired just handling this all on my own. During this Cultural Festival, I've been asking other people to help out with our problem, enlisting the help of the Executive Committee, the Wall Newspaper Club and Irisu-san.

I became extremely mindful of the "Juumoji" incident. While I'm curious about how he carries out his theft, I'm also curious as to why he does it as well. Thinking about this, my body becomes so restless that I can't stay in one spot or stand still.

However, after taking a deep breath and thinking as the president of the Classics Club, I just couldn't view other people as objects to be used, and I couldn't treat making requests to other people as some kind of strategy to be utilized.

It's quite unimaginable, to think I could act in such an unconcerned manner.

No, I mustn't become timid. Hasn't Oreki-san been doing his best to help out? We have yet to increase the sales of the anthology.

I must go around making more requests tomorrow. I don't dislike doing such a thing, as it's something I must do, but...

I guess I'm just feeling a little bit tired.

045 - ♦10

I had wanted to go to sleep earlier tonight, but I just couldn't for some reason. So I took out a book from the bookshelf, which was my other treasure, *Body Talk*.

As I couldn't read *Ashes at Dusk* since it's not with me, perhaps I may have deified it a bit. For the other that got left behind, *Body Talk* was actually quite interesting once I began reading it. I should be getting ready to sleep, yet right now my brain's completely invigorated.

Its genre could be classified as slapstick. The protagonist is a young man who is unable to speak due to his deafness, but is able to convey his thoughts telepathically via touching. As he is also able to read other people's thoughts by touching, he is often seen as a troublemaker. Though it discarded realism in favour of an interesting story, the troubles the protagonist encountered still made sense. To put it briefly, there were aliens and zombies. No matter how much destruction was wreaked, a short anthropomorphic cat would appear in a blank panel, signalling the end of the scene in the next page. As a result, the tempo was quite quick, which was unheard of in commercial works. It was more like a comic strip than other mangas. In the end, placing the book on my pillow, I rested on my futon and read it till the end.

By the way, this cat, a Gourdski-like gag character[30], would often appear in all sorts of acrobatic stances at the corners of various panels for no reason whatsoever. It was probably the author's surrogate character. Despite standing upright, it wore no clothes except for a pair of baggy boots. A puss in boots, essentially.

Despite having a silly plot with a communication discord, it had quite a deep meaning as well. All the characters, including the protagonist, were all acting in self-interest, as they're frequently seeking a favourable outcome for themselves. Yes, this is a good work. But if I were to think of presenting this to Kouchi-sempai, then I'd find that there were a few weak points that stood out, like the story being a bit too random, too many panels with nothing but plain backgrounds, one too many rough sketches in the panels,

and the dialogue sometimes not connecting from panel to panel.

...And so, I'm still at a loss on what to show her.

The only light came from the lamp beside my bed, with the bookshelf submerging in the flickering darkness.

Ashes at Dusk and *Body Talk* were two non-commercial works which I have a lot of admiration for. Of course, these were not the only books in my room; there were also commercial works which shone just as bright as those two.

There really were many people who could draw interesting works.

Before turning off the lamp, I got out of my futon and took out my own manga from my desk drawer. I saw nothing but tedious white drawings. I would really not want to take this out.

Well, it's not like my drawing is bad. Though the artwork was a bit inconsistent, it's not that despairingly bad. But upon reading one or two pages...
The panels just don't make any sense, and I can no longer understand the dialogue that was written, nor could I feel anything from the story. I have no idea where it begins or ends. It was pretty much a disharmonious read.

If I were to let someone else read this, they would probably not need sleeping pills anymore.

Yet, I'm reading it right now.

Reading my own manga, it feels more like I've ingested some stimulants rather than sleeping pills. With a somewhat unspeakable feeling, I returned the manuscript of my manga to my desk drawer. It's no good, I shouldn't have read this to make me fall asleep. As staying awake would be troublesome, I decided to take some real sleeping pills and get to sleep.

046 - ♠12

After saving energy for a long while, I can more or less predict my own patterns. By saving up too much in the day, I ended up with excessive usable energy at night, which was bad for sleep. I couldn't fall asleep even this late at night. The clock had long since passed one o'clock and was now approaching two.

To think I don't even remember what energy it was that I've saved in bulk, though I do know I've not used up any. How ironic that during the period of the rosy high school life known as the Kamiyama High School Cultural Festival, I could not find an outlet to use any energy.

Waiting to fall asleep, I thought of reading a book, but right now there was only that boring paperback novel. While a boring book could at least substitute for sleeping pills, I instead opted to surf the internet. I was now searching for the official homepage for the Kamiyama High School Cultural Festival.

Clicking the link on the search engine site, I twitched at the pain remaining in my right eye.

The top page caption read "KANYA FESTIVAL NOW OPEN! ALL ARE WELCOME." An image of the play taking place in the Gymnasium was posted on it.

Scrolling down the page revealed a list of the participating clubs of each day, a transportation access guide, advice to visitors... And my eyes landed on a place I did not notice two days ago - the mail order section.

It was a mail order service for all goods related to the Cultural Festival. On sale was of course stuff sold during the Cultural Festival.

The items listed include original T-shirts by the Fashion Study Club, the Literature Club anthology *Kodama*, and the Manga Studies Club anthology *Zeamis*. Is that all? If it's the Kamiyama High School Cultural Festival, then surely they have more to sell, but it seemed this was all there was.

Now isn't this a bit empty for a shop? Looking further, there was a mail order form with an email address attached. The address shares the same domain name as Kamiyama High School, and the account name was "somuiinkai." Satoshi, surely the Executive Committee should have done better than this. To begin with, I've yet to seriously ask Satoshi what it is that he does in the Executive Committee.

And then there's this email address. They could have at least used an English name for it. But "somuiinkai?" ...Then again, I have no problem with a name that's at least understandable to a Japanese-speaker like me.

All that remains to be seen on the site are links to other basic external sites, which don't reveal much information. Anyway, I figured it was about time I got to sleep, so I switched off the computer and returned to my room. As to how to fall asleep, I decided to worry about that after I crawl into my bed.

047 - ♣15

I decided to take a walk during the night.

Having just taken a bath not long before, my body was particularly sensitive to the night breeze. As it was late October, I could easily catch a cold if I'm not careful. Hence I wore a jacket just to be safe.

I could just about see the new moon above the skies along with the stars. The weather was just as great today as it was yesterday. As things go it'll probably be fine tomorrow as well, which is good. As a member of the Executive Committee, it's good because it means the events tomorrow will go smoothly under good weather; as a member of the Classics Club, it's good because it means we can get more visitors coming to school; and for me personally, it's good because I get to participate in as many outdoor events as I like. I get to see the various clubs preparing and performing all sorts of skills which I've only heard of. It would be a pity if their chances to show off their skills were denied by the rain.

For example, the performance of the Magic Club's second year, Tayama-sempai was superb today. While I have the knowledge of how the cup and ball trick actually works in my database, even I would not be able to perform it as well as he did. That was why I applauded from the bottom of my heart. By the way, when I said I am unable to perform, it's not that I do not possess the skills, but it's more to do with me not being confident enough. Just because I wanted to learn the secret to the cup and ball trick doesn't mean I wanted to try it out as well.

You could say I am similar to Houtarou in this aspect.

...However, while Houtarou himself insists that he hadn't done much during his three years at junior high, he wasn't exactly the worthless person he claims to be.

I walked in the dark, under the streetlamps surrounded by winged insects in the residential district. As I was wearing sneakers, I could not hear my own footsteps. I could hear someone watching their late night TV shows from somewhere.

Ever since entering Kamiyama High School and coming into contact with a rare medium called Chitanda Eru, Houtarou has changed. Or I should say, he's revealed his true worth. And since then he has demonstrated his sharpness, his clarity of vision, or perhaps instinct, deductive skills if you will, which I had never known he had before. Ever since that day when Chitanda-san was simply sitting alone in the Geology Room, I have been amazed by him many times. Houtarou was no simple colourless and useless human being. He has become an amazing individual hiding an amazing secret power within him.

There was a saying that a skilled hawk hides its talons[31]. When I discovered Houtarou's hawk side, deep inside, did I truly feel happy for him?

This is why I have decided not to expect Houtarou to solve the "Juumoji" incident, as it's not suitable for a person like him. Instead, I will be the one to do it.

Originally, I would not have been able to seek out the truth using my database alone. However, right now, in order to be able to look up to my friend's eyes, I decided to mimic him. I am well aware of how shameful this is. All this talk about how this is to "promote the name of the Classics Club," that's all just an excuse.

That I understand very well.

Well, even a grade school student would be able to come up with excuses like that.

Now then.

The potential suspects for the phantom thief "Juumoji" are numerous. As expected from Houtarou's sharp observation, "How many people do you

think have entered and left the school grounds during the Cultural Festival? And that's not counting that we have nearly a thousand students."

This kind of scenario is often found not just in detective novels, but also in real life investigations as well. This is true even for a small scale crime. In order to pinpoint the identity of the culprit, we must first narrow down the suspects.

From within the six billion people in this world, suspects would be narrowed down by first investigating into details like travel patterns or personal circumstances. For example, if there were a murder within a mountain mansion that was surrounded by mountain fire, the killer would no doubt be someone within the mansion (provided no one heard any helicopter taking off). If a rich young lady gets killed in her holiday retreat, then the killer would be someone who went to the retreat with her. Going along these patterns, the culprit could be narrowed down to around a dozen, by which we could begin investigating their alibis.

However, the "Juumoji" incident was different.

The thefts did not occur in any sealed environment. As the A Capella Club had their cooler box outside, anyone could have stolen its contents if they wished; the Go Club did not have a lock in their room; the Fortune Telling Association only had one person, so the culprit only needed to wait within the restroom nearby; the Gardening Club was targeted when they decided to leave the room for a bit; and then there's the Magic Club yesterday. Not knowing when the item was stolen, anybody could be a suspect, hidden within the sea of anonymity.

First, the culprit is no doubt a student of our school. It's difficult to conceive of someone from outside our school planning something like this and carrying it out for two consecutive days. But this still means there are nearly a thousand suspects. A thousand! It would be a bit silly and pointless to declare "The suspect is amongst these thousand people!" Even a proper law enforcement agency would have their work cut out questioning the alibis of a thousand people.

...The only place that was strange was The Cooking Club. If I were to believe their president who said they had prepared a ladle, then it means the ladle was stolen just before the Wild Fire contest began. As the culprit had

the time to prepare a declaration of crime and the *Kanya Festival Guide*, there was a possibility that the culprit had come from within.

However, would members of The Cooking Club want to obstruct the Wild Fire tournament, which requires a lot of meticulous preparation? A ladle is one of the most basic kitchen utensils. What if we had decided to make a stew dish instead? It would have quickly aroused suspicion. Surely it would make more sense for the culprit to pick a less risky target like the Occult Studies Club ([O]KARUTO KEN オカルト研) or the "Cheering Club ([O]UENDAN 応援団) and Cheerleading Club Combined."

I decided to discard that possibility.

Then how am I supposed to trim down the number of suspects from these thousand people?

...Then again, a serial killer or serial arsonist would have been difficult to find as the suspect base would be huge. In most detective fiction, they would usually have to wait for the culprit to commit their next act before they could form a database. Recalling one of my favourite Sherlock Holmes stories, *The Adventure of the Six Napoleons*, no one could figure out who the culprit was when the first Napoleon bust was smashed.

That's it. By waiting for the incidents to accumulate, we can then identify the common link between the victims, and then using this link lure the culprit to commit his next act. (By the way, while this common link could be called the "missing link," I just realized the missing Wheel of Fortune could be called a "missing ring." So which one is correct? To quote Chitanda-san: I'm *really* curious about it!)

The only piece of detective work I can do is to wait at the next scene of crime. That's the only way.

By waiting at the scene, the culprit may commit some errors or run into misfortune, leaving behind clues which could significantly narrow down the number of suspects. In other words, I'm waiting for him to make a mistake.

Had I realized the culprit had stolen something from the Magic Club before the show had started, but only left his crime declaration after it had ended, I

would have stayed behind. Surely not everyone who had remained in Class 2-D's classroom till the end was only there for the magic performance.

In that case, I need to wake up early tomorrow, and arrive at Kamiyama High School first thing in the morning in order to get to "Juumoji's" next target, a club that starts with [KU]. While I'm not that confident with my own observational skills, I'll definitely find any clues left behind by "Juumoji."

The world must be getting strange for me to find conclusions from my database alone. Perhaps I'm interested in seeing if I could amaze myself.

I made a heel turn under the residential streets lit by the moonlight and streetlamps. As I slapped my cheeks to get myself geared up, I ended up being barked at by a dog.

5 - The Kudryavka Sequence

5.1 - Four People, Four Cultural Festivals

048 - ♣16

WANTED!

As the 42nd Kanya Festival draws to its conclusion, the various clubs have held their activities in an orderly manner. However, as our dear readers would no doubt be aware already, that there exists those who would disrupt such order with blatant disregard. Indeed, it is none other than the thief known as "Juumoji".

This thief would leave a message behind of the clubs which he has stolen from. Besides that, he (this writer is not yet certain as to the gender of the thief) has also left behind something else, for fear of inspiring copycat crimes, as a socially responsible publication, we have' decided not to disclose what it is.

In any case, seven clubs have been targeted to date. As mentioned in our 4pm edition yesterday, the clubs that have been hit include the A Capella Club, the Go Club, and the Magic Club as well as how they were targeted. And as our previous report mentions, "Juumoji" is still on course to stealing ten items.

The Wall Newspaper Club would now like to make an appeal to our beloved readers, the students of Kamiyama High School. Are you going to sit by and let this "Juumoji" get away with his crimes? Can you possibly sit by and let him, most likely a student himself, think we're inferior to him?

This cannot be allowed to happen!

The Wall Newspaper Club would thus like to seek out detectives willing to catch the phantom thief "Juumoji" in his act, and reveal his true identity to all. We have great expectations of such a person, and their wisdom in defeating such trickery shall be published in a special edition for all to see.

Now that sure was quite a blusterous article, though I don't particularly dislike such style.

I didn't really learn much from the part about how the clubs like the A Capella Club and Go Club were targeted. The A Capella Club's cooler box had been placed outside the courtyard from the beginning of their performance, while the Go Club left their Go stones inside their club room the day before the Cultural Festival started without locking the door. In other words, the suspect could have been anyone.

I was probably reading the article posted on the billboard by the entrance with a smiling face. While I hardly know the people from the Wall Newspaper Club, I do get a sort of closeness with them by just reading such an article.

Besides, what moved me was the timing of this special edition. As they were supposed to release a special edition once every two hours (come to think of it, that coincides with the time taken for "Juumoji" to commit his crimes) starting from 8am. But right now it's only a little past 7. They must have pasted this first thing upon arriving at school. They sure got some spirit.

As I too was full of spirits to begin with, there's no way I could lose to them, as I too had arrived at school by 7. To be precise, I was already here when the gates opened at 6. And I was thinking there wouldn't be anyone at this time of day, but there turned out to be quite a number of people. Guess common sense doesn't work during the Kamiyama High School Cultural Festival.

Now, for the main target.

There were two clubs that begin with [KU]: the Quiz Study Club (**[KU]IZU KEN クイズ研**) and the Global Act Club (**[GU]RO-BARU AKUTO KURABU グローバルアクトクラブ**). While the [KU] in Quiz Study Club lacked a diacritic (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dakuten), and would seem like the obvious choice, their activities were already completed by the first day, not to mention they did not book any classroom for use (as a member of the General Committee, I guarantee this to be true). On the other hand, the Global Act Club would be holding a panel exhibition, which was

quite rare for the clubs here, which means the door to their room would be open at all times. So by process of elimination, the best way to catch "Juumoji" on his act would be here.

I climbed the stairs and headed to the classroom of Class 3-E, where the Global Act Club would have their exhibition. Before leaving school yesterday, I went to check if they had anything stolen or if any note was left behind, but could find nothing. So by making a stakeout here first thing in the morning before "Juumoji" could act, I was sure of my success in catching him.

Even so.....

There was already someone else in the Class 3-E classroom.

"Hey, Fukube, you're late."

It's Tani-kun, and it wasn't just him.

"Hmm? You're with the Classics Club..... Thanks for the help last time. So, you're into this case as well?"

It was Haba Tomohiro-sempai from the second year. I met him during the "Empress Incident" during the summer vacation, he's from the Detective Fiction Study Club if I remember correctly. *Once this becomes public, it'll attract a great deal of attention.* Looks like Tani-kun's prediction was correct. Does that mean I too have been attracted to it as well? Well, I don't deny it though.

Besides these two, there was another student I didn't know standing some distance from us. As this is the last day, it's not like the clubs would need to prepare for anything extra, so I presume he too is a detective-wannabe. That makes four of us. This is bad, though we may now have more eyes present, it would also mean security has become too tight for "Juumoji" to make his move.

Hiding such anxiety, I spoke cheerfully to Tani-kun,

"Hey, morning. For you to stakeout here, you sure must have some spirits, huh?"

"Same goes for you."

"So? Has it begun?"

With his thumb, Tani-kun pointed to the centre of the classroom,

"As if I'd show any kindness to an expected worthy rival. Go investigate yourself."

He must have not found anything yet, as if the crime has been committed, these three detective-wannabes wouldn't still be here. So I shrugged my shoulders.

The clock had just moved past 7. As we would need to be by the Gymnasium by 8.30 to have our attendances taken, if "Juumoji" were to appear, he too would choose this moment to strike. I, and most likely the other three as well, would be focusing on whoever has come here before then. If the crime had happened during this time frame, we would be able to narrow down the suspects.

Silently, I moved away from Tani-kun and Haba-sempai and leaned on one of the walls by the corridor. If I were a hard-boiled detective, I would have taken out a cigarette and smoked it while I waited. Unfortunately, this is a high school, so I took out some chewing gum instead.

049 - ♥11

The final day has at last arrived.

As it's a Saturday, there were more visitors from outside of school than usual. Today is also the day where the "Juumoji Incident" must come to an end. It's a make-or-break moment, no matter how one looks at it. To get things started, I first headed to the nearest billboard to have a look at the newest edition of the "Kami High Monthly".

There was already someone else present when I arrived.

Crossing her arms and nodding her head, this person didn't seem like a high school student. She's most likely in college. Dressed in an orange shirt, she had rather tanned arms. Even though autumn had already arrived, she still wore short jeans that still give out the scent of summer. Standing with her legs slightly apart, she gently tapped the ground rhythmically with one of her feet. It looked as though she was enjoying herself.

And right now this person was reading the wall newspaper, moving her gaze up and down many times, before long a smile appeared on her face,

"I see..."

I heard her whisper. Unfolding her arms, she turned around, neither in a hurry nor sluggishly, and disappeared through the entrance as her guest slippers squeaked against the floor.

I wonder where I have met her before? A lively looking college student..... I just can't figure out where. But I'm sure I've seen her face before. I was quite confident in memorizing people's faces and names, after all.

"Hmm..."

I guess I just can't quite remember. It must have been my imagination.

050 - ♠13

As usual, hardly anyone came to the Geology Room. That said, we still managed to sell up to thirty copies so far, so not that we have anything to complain about.

While I'm grateful for not needing to work hard, upon seeing those boxes, even I could feel myself getting anxious. Right now those generic looking boxes look quite intimidating to me.

Inside those boxes are printed words that will never be read by a single soul. Besides, by staying sealed inside those boxes, the books would slowly transform, page after page of words would slowly go yellow. As though they would etch itself into one's heart upon being read, these words are now longing to be read. Sealed away in a damp place never to see the light of day, they would continue to ferment and go mouldy while chanting "Read me!" in eerie way. But still they will never be read, all the way until they rot away, or get burnt completely.....

Guess I really have too much free time to be making such imagination. With 141 copies to go, not even entrusting 20 copies to Irisu could guarantee we would ever sell out. So I was pretty much prepared for the worst. There's just no point in keeping up to a hundred copies of a single anthology. If we end up with a large number of copies remaining, the only fate that awaits them would be for them to rot away in some storage, or be disposed as recyclable paper.

I looked at the cover drawn by Ibara, of a rabbit and dog biting each other, as well as the book binding, glued together by polypropylene.

" ....."

Hmm. It wouldn't be so bad even if she had cut corners with it.

Well, at any rate, there's nothing much I could do. Resting my chin on my hands, I listened to the gentle sound of musical instruments being played from the Gymnasium. Looking across the courtyard at the General Block, I noticed one of the classroom windows being covered in black curtains, resembling a broken tooth.

I switched the hand on which my chin rested.

….. I did not dislike the idea of using the "Juumoji Incident" in order to draw visitors over to the Classics Club, much like how zoos would covet a panda to raise attendance. If the Wall Newspaper mentions the Classics Club as being the last target, that'll surely attract people's attention.

Yet I was going along a different train of thought, namely the selling of *Hyouka*. Just attracting visitors was no guarantee of improving sales.....

There were no visitors now, though we do have lots of time. And so I began to think, slowly progressing with my thoughts.

[141 COPIES REMAINING]

The Global Act Club, as its name suggests, is involved in global current affairs, thus its exhibition panels include stuff like the flood in Bangladesh, or the internal unrest in Indonesia. Unfortunately, I wasn't particularly interested in such topics so I can't say whether this stuff is fascinating.

Wait a minute, what have we here? A panel reads "A Mexican cornbread you can make", another says "How to make Bulgarian yogurt using ordinary dairy products". They've got all sorts of ethnic dishes introduced here. Feeling interested, I decided to have a chat with their president, who replied with a bitter looking expression,

"We're not exactly a cooking club. This is a global affairs volunteer club, after all. Though we also dress in various ethnic clothing, but we thought ethnic dishes was more interesting. Actually we would be making some of those dishes ourselves. ..... though it doesn't look like anyone was interested in how it's made."

Indeed. Whether it's thanks to the Wall Newspaper Club, or by word of mouth, as time passed, the number of detective-wannabes seemed to have increased, and the Class 3-E classroom gradually became rather crowded. As I did not hear this from the Executive Committee, it seems the Global Act Club intends to make cornbread on the spot and give them out to visitors. In less than an hour after student attendance was taken in the Gymnasium, all the cornbread had been consumed by these detective wannabes. I can totally understand the president's lamentations. Yet if such a crowd were to appear at the Classics Club, we would probably be sighing and crying out in joy at the same time.

" ..... Nothing's happening so far."

A bored sounding whisper entered my ear, it was Tani-kun. He was already saying that even though there was still an hour to go. Yet I find myself agreeing with him. My watch showed the time was approaching ten soon. If "Juumoji" were to release a note every two hours, he would have to strike soon (as Kami High's lessons begin at eight). Still, no matter how many

eyes were present, no suspicious movement was spotted.

Could it be? A doubt arose in my head. Could it be that "Juumoji" really targeted the Quiz Club instead? No, it can't be. Their activity was long finished, and their members would surely be scattered around the school enjoying the Cultural Festival. How is a thief going to steal from them in such conditions?

But if I consider the question of what could be stolen, then the Global Act Club would seem like an odd target. For example, the Magic Club had "candle" (**[KI]YANDORU** キャンドル) that begins with [KI], but I can't find anything in the Global Act Club that begins with [KU]. Since all students would be wearing indoor shoes (**[KU]TSU** 靴) inside Kami High, could it be that he would be stealing those? I can't really imagine him leaving a message the reads "Hey I've stolen your shoes, mwahahaha." (That said, the shoes from the cosplay costumes in the Manga Club and other fashion clubs don't count.) If the phantom thief "Juumoji" can twist "water" as "Aquarius" (**[A]KUERIASU** アクエリアス), then there's got to be something here. Could it be that he's given up because he couldn't figure out what matches his sequence as well?

Amongst the detective-wannabes,

"This is getting boring, I'm off."

Said one.

"Text me if something happens."

Said another. Even Haba-sempai had disappeared, apparently off for some club errand. The only people that were here since the beginning were probably me and Tani-kun.

What's wrong with you "Juumoji"? You can't simply be scared just because there's many of us! I don't believe this, it's nearly ten now!

….. Suddenly, Tani-kun placed his hand in his pocket and took out his cell. He seemed to have received a text as he turned on the display.

It was then when Tani-kun raised his voice,

" .....WHAT?!"

Huh? What happened?

Tani-kun closed his cell phone and placed it back into his pocket, and appeared to dash off. Before he does, I decided to calmly ask him what had happened,
"Did something happen?"

Tani-kun bit his lips, as though gesturing it's got nothing to do with me. The way he's remaining silent means it's something to do with "Juumoji".

I decided to push his buttons a bit,

"I don't get as many friends like you, Tani-kun, so please do tell me what just happened."

Things sure proceed smoothly if you're willing to lower yourself. Tani-kun snorted,

"Hmph, this 'Juumoji' had set up a decoy for us to fall into."

"A decoy? Could it be that he went for the Quiz Club?"

He shook his head and smirked,

"No,"

"Then who?"

Making sure the other detective-wannabes couldn't hear him, Tani-kun lowered his voice,

"It's the Light Music Club (**[KE]IONBU 軽音部**). Their guitar strings (**[GE]N 弦**) were stolen."

The Light Music Club??

In contrast to Tani-kun, I raised my voice without thinking,

"You're kidding me, right?!"

Tani-kun's face quickly went sullen,

"If you don't believe me you can go confirm it for yourself. I'll be off then," He said and dashed out of the Class 3-E classroom. I thought of chasing after him, but quickly abandoned the thought, as I knew it'd be pointless.

"Juumoji" is more flexible than I could ever imagine. I have been bound by the suggestion of the gojuuon sequence and the release of a note every two hours, and was hoping to make a stakeout in his supposed next target, thinking he too would be bound by these rules. Yet, upon seeing the heavy security of the Global Act Club, he had opted to go straight for the Light Music Club. How could I be beaten by such a simple move like that? You can't win against that.

This means the usual method of meeting the suspect head on would not work against him.

In that case, I should focus on finding out what his weak spot is, but I did not have the talent for that. After all, I would have already done that if I had known what his weak spot was.

Then.....

I've been thinking since last night. In order to catch this "Juumoji" from the sea of anonymity, I thought the only way was to stakeout in his intended target. I could not figure out any other way to do so.

Yet "Juumoji" had easily evaded such a confrontation. If he could abandon such rules so easily, how am I going to catch him on the act?

This requires a rethink.

There's got to be something else which I could do.

052 - ♠14

As expected of a Saturday, by noon there were already more visitors than before.

Thanks to Irisu's movie selling well, it seems the twenty copies we entrusted to her had managed to sell as well. As a result, Chitanda had came over to bring ten more copies over.

Most of the visitors that came here were those who were just visiting this part of the school grounds on a whim. Two were middle-aged women, who decided to buy a copy each as they chatted idly away. Including those two, we've now sold nine copies today. As long as this keeps up, this could be something to look forward to.

"Thank you very much," I said with a stiff smile as I saw them off.

….. I feel like taking a leak.

It's times like these when being the only person in the store becomes bothersome, as I couldn't find someone else to stand in for me while I'm away. While we're merely selling anthologies, it doesn't feel right to leave any interested buyers waiting. So I locked the candy box storing the money and placed it in my shoulder bag, and then took out a piece of paper and wrote: *Currently away. Anthology* Hyouka - *200 yen per copy. If interested, please leave money on counter.*

Under my bag, I noticed something glowing. It was the heart-shaped brooch that Ibara threw at me yesterday. For some reason, I placed it beside the stack of *Hyouka* anthologies and wrote another note: *Please feel free to exchange brooch with something of equivalent value.*

Now then, nature is calling out to me.

Phew.

I'm home.

Hey, I'm only gone for about five minutes and the brooch's gone. Instead, I see 200 yen being placed on the table. Did someone buy a copy? When did they come?

I noticed someone had written on the note for the brooch exchange. Upon seeing it, my face went sour. I've seen that handwriting before. Reading it, I knew right away who had visited.

You shouldn't leave the store unattended like that. You wouldn't want this brooch, I presume? Then, I'll have it. I've placed the exchange item on top of the stack of Hyoukas. *This would be a good way for you to kill time...*

It's my sis. So she did come. Yet it feels bad for her to sneak in during the five minutes when I was away. On second thought, personally, it's actually not that bad.

Starting with sis's fountain pen, this Straw Millionaire Protocol has gone from a needle badge, a Glock pistol, weak flour, and a brooch, and now it's gone full circle back to my sis again. So what's this item that she had exchange? As it's coming from her, it's gotta be something of interest. I took a look at the stack of *Hyoukas*.

True enough, on top of that mountain, was an anthology-like book similar in size to *Hyouka*. Bound in the back with polypropylene glue, it's quality was inferior to that of *Hyouka*, though it was rather thick. The cover featured an illustration of a girl's face from the side. It wasn't a live-action sketch, but a manga drawing.

At any rate, I returned the candy box to its original position and placed the 200 yen my sis left behind inside. I don't supposed I need bother counting how many copies we have remaining. Even if it's my sister, I just can't see her stealing many copies of *Hyouka*. Resting my back on the chair, I picked up the book my sis left behind.

On the side of the cover was a vertical row of small words. Seems to be the title. *Ashes at Dusk*? What a morbid title. And besides that title was the name of the author. "Anshinin Takuha"? Sounds like a Buddhist monk if

you ask me, most likely a pen name. And I hope I got that name pronounced properly.

Looking at the title and author name, I wondered what my sis was thinking giving an occult book to me. Flipping to see the contents, turns out it was indeed a manga. It opens with a scene of a sailor uniformed schoolgirl exiting a train station built of wood. Whoa, this drawing is pretty good.

I see. If it's a manga, it would indeed help me kill time. Though it feels weird for sis to show such blatant goodwill. Well, if she had brought it all the way here from home, it can't be that bad. I might as well give her my gratitude and start reading this.

Before that, I decided to see if there was any afterword by the author, and sure enough, it was on the last page.

Here it is.

How did you find *Ashes at Dusk*?

If you ask me, I thought it was well done, though I'm mostly in charge of the background art and didn't really contribute much. If you had enjoyed reading this, rather than thank me, you should thank its writer and illustrator.

Neither three of us belong to the Manga Study Club. We are simply people interested in manga who had decided to try and create a manga on our own. As a debut work, guess we shouldn't be bragging about how good it is ourselves. That is for the readers to decide.

We do not intend to disband after just making this once. We plan on making another manga in next year's Kanya Festival. Our writer "A" plans on writing a mystery story for it, and I am told it would be based on one or two of Agatha Christie's most famous works. As such, the title has already been decided.

So stay tuned for our next work, *The Kudryavka Sequence* ..... Yeah, I

know, another morbid sounding title. (LOL)

I look forward to meeting you again in next year's Kanya Festival.

It was written in neat handwriting.

"....."

I raised my eyebrow and read the afterword again.

Kanya Festival, this means this manga was drawn by one of Kamiyama High School's students. There can be no mistake, this was created for the Kanya Festival.

And then there's this "Kudryavka Sequence". While I have no idea what on earth this "Kudryavka" means, but I am intrigued by the word "Sequence". No, if it was just that word alone, I wouldn't have been that interested. Rather, it was the mention of "Agatha Christie's most famous works".

Moreover, this was brought over by my sis. I once again looked at the memo she wrote.

This would be a good way for you to kill time...

Why is it a good way for me? If it's just for me to read a manga, then the way she said it was strange. This was definitely not her way of saying "Since my brother is feeling bored, I've brought a manga for him to read." You can bet my ass that I'm right.

"What bothersome matter have you gotten me into?"

I muttered and straightened my back.

The art looks good, and the afterword said it's enjoyable, so I might as well give it a read. While it wasn't explicitly written, but the person who wrote

the afterword seemed pretty confident of what he's saying. Even if this was a random joke by my sis, it'll still do as a great way to kill time.

[121 COPIES REMAINING]

053 - ♣18

I've finally organized my thoughts.

My conclusion was: There's nothing I can personally do about it.

For better or for worse, I'm pretty good when it comes to letting go and giving up.
In other words, there was only one thing left which I could do right now. So I said calmly,

"I'm counting on you, Houtarou."

054 - ♥12

I am currently searching for a person.

It is none other than the President of the Broadcast Club. Thanks to the Juumoji Incident, news of the Global Act Club receiving more visitors than usual have reached my ears from various people, and not just Fukube-san alone. I am very curious as to who is this "Juumoji-san", and why is he continuing with such thefts. My mind was filled only with thoughts as to why he would be doing this. Yet it's only now that I began to think of such things. Until now we had only learned the what and the how, which was pretty frustrating.

If we could attract many visitors by using the Juumoji Incident, wouldn't this be a great chance? Right now, I am making the most of this bold chance, or rather, I'm executing one part of a systemized plan to make this chance work. Thus, I am attempting to offer an interview on behalf of the Classics Club with the Broadcast Club during their lunchtime broadcast.

With advice from Irisu-san, I have managed to enlist the assistance of the Wall Newspaper Club in promoting our cause, the next step would be to speak with the Broadcast Club.

However, just when I thought I would meet him at the Audio Visual Room, the president wasn't there. A girl, whose voice I recognized as the host of the lunch time broadcast, heard my request and tilted her head,

"The Prez' is probably somewhere around here. Wonder where he went..... Well, since he's not yet decided what to put in today's programme yet, you might have a chance if you speak with him."

Thankfully, I knew what the president looked like, so I should be able to find him if I see him. So I began moving around the campus in search of him. And yet, I couldn't find him.

I came to the third floor of the Special Block during my search, thinking of paying Oreki-san a visit while he watches the stall. While I did stop by

before to collect another 10 anthology copies as requested by Irisu-san, but he was fast asleep.

As I climbed the stairs, I noticed a person walking towards the Geology Room. To my surprise, it was Yoshino Yasukuni-san, the president of the Broadcast Club which I was looking for. As I did not expect to see him here, I straightened my uniform scarf and chased after him,

"Hello, Yoshino-san."

Yoshino-san stopped and turned around with widened eyes. His unpretentious hairstyle and thick eyebrows stood out,

"Yes?"

I bowed politely,

"My name is Chitanda Eru, the president of the Classics Club. I was looking everywhere for you, as I was hoping to request something from you."

Yet Yoshida-san did not wait for me to finish my sentence. Upon giving my name, he startled me with a yell which overshadowed the last part of my greeting.
"So you're the Classics Club president! What a coincidence, you came at just the right time. I was just looking for you for a favour."

Oh?

I wondered what it was, and soon enough, Yoshino-san began explaining,

"Is the report by the Wall Newspaper Club true? That 'Juumoji's' final target would be the Classics Club? 'Juumoji's' the trending topic right now, you see? So I was thinking of doing something about that for today's lunch broadcast, otherwise we won't have anything interesting to talk about for

the rest of the afternoon. Thank goodness for this incident to happen. As for who would be our guest, that would naturally be the president of the final targeted club. So you interested? Don't worry, all you'll need to do is answer a few of my questions. Besides, you've got a pretty voice, so it'll be just fine. How about it?"

Oh my.

I didn't even need to apply any of Irisu-san's negotiating skills that she taught me. Though I never expected myself to be a guest in a radio broadcast, as I was only thinking of having them simply mention us in their broadcast. But as a guest..... That would be like Fukube-san making his speech before the Quiz Club president in the First Day.

..... Will I be able to do this?

A long silence ensued. Yoshino-san scratched his head,

"Well, you don't have to do this if you don't want to, of course."

"No, wait,"

The sight of the mountains of *Hyouka* floated in my mind, as well as Mayaka's expression upon realizing she made the ordering mistake. I thought of Oreki-san and Fukube-san's hard work as well.

I should not be hesitant, so I bowed deeply once again,
"I'll be most glad to do this,"

"R, really?"

Yoshino-san broke into a broad smile,

"Then, do please come to the AV Room at noon, the broadcast will begin at 12.30. You may bring your boxed-lunch. Thanks a lot, I'll be seeing you then!"

"No, the pleasure is all mine."

I wonder if I could say I felt relieved? Instead, I felt anxious. While Yoshino-san all I needed to do was answer a few questions, I'm sure they aren't anything private. I took a deep breath.

Oh yes, I came here in order to pay Oreki-san a visit. The Geology Room door was closed, even though it's supposed to be left open for the whole day. I knocked and opened the door.

Inside were Oreki-san, as well as Fukube-san, who raised his hand to greet me,

"Hey, Chitanda-san. Irisu-sempai's managed to sell her copies quite well, hasn't she?"

"Yes, she's asked for another 10 copies,"

I said while looking at Oreki-san, who seemed to be fervently reading some anthology and didn't bother to lift his head. Could it be that he didn't notice my presence? Noticing my gaze, Fukube-san shurugged his shoulders,

"He's reading a manga. And he seems pretty obsessed with it, since he's not even listening to what I'm saying."

His eyes fixed on the book, Oreki-san spoke,

"I heard you. The thief had skipped [KU] altogether and went for the Light Music Club, which began with [KE]."

"It's no use just listening if you don't get the importance of what's happening, you know."

"Hang on, I'm about to get to the ending."

You see? Fukube-san gestured to me as he shrugged his shoulders again.

Upon thirty seconds after he told us to "hang on", Oreki-san finally closed the manga he was reading and sighed deeply. Fukube-san began to tease him,

"Who would have thought Houtarou would be so immersed into a manga? Maybe you should consider follow Mayaka as her disciple?"

What's the difference between these doujin manga and normal manga? I'm not too familiar with such things.....

As Oreki-san glared at Fukube-san, besides looking as lethargic as usual, I somehow felt that he looked somewhat intoxicated by something as well. Turning his eyes away with some embarrassment, he muttered,

"This, is good."

"Really? Let me have look at it as well afterwards."

This was the first time I ever saw Oreki-san with such an expression, and it piqued my interest in the manga as well. Taking a closer look, the cover had a cute yet sad-looking girl drawn on it. The way the girl's expression was drawn was amazing, and the way the fabric of her sailor uniform, which was similar to mine, was drawn was also an eye-opener. I could even sense the wind blowing from the direction she was facing as well.

.....
Umm.

As a habit, I tilted my head. Fukube-san saw me and asked,

"What's wrong, Chitanda-san?"

"Well. ... "

I looked at the illustration once again. A pitiable yet cute looking girl. The way the fabric is drawn.

"Haven't I seen this drawing somewhere before?"

"Must be your imagination,"

Oreki-san immediately responsed,

"I only got this manga from my sis earlier today, so there's no way you could've seen it."

Is, that so?

I looked at the manga once again.....No, there's no mistake. I'm confident of this myself,

"I've seen this before. This drawing, or rather, the drawing style of this manga."

"From long ago?"

Fukube-san asked, to which I shook my head,

"No, probably recently,"

But I couldn't quite remember when! If I can't clearly remember when I saw it, then I must have only taken a glimpse of it. Once I have seen something, I never forget it too soon.

Umm, ummmm.....
"I, I..."

"Chitanda, we've got our hands full right now,"

Oreki-san as though chiding me. I understood it myself, we're at a very busy period. Even when we aren't busy, Oreki-san would frequently give a grim expression everytime I feel curious about something. It's something I understand very well. But, I couldn't help myself. Feeling a desire to find the answer, I ended up saying it,

" .....I'm *really* curious about it."

I placed my hand on my throat,

"It's on the tip of my tongue,"

"Swallow it back,"

"I can't do that,"

"Then do something about it,"

"Let me have a look at other pages!"

Giving a sigh, Oreki-san handed the manga over to me. Looking at the cover, I don't remember seeing the title *Ashes at Dusk* anywhere else before. Seems like it's only the drawing that I remember seeing.

Flicking through the pages..... I came across the drawing of a boy, to which I exclaimed,

"Ah!"

"What? You remember something?"

For some reason, Oreki-san looked as though he was disappointed, which got me somewhat curious. I nodded lightly,

"Yes, probably. The drawing of this boy, it resembled what I saw. I remember seeing it by the notice board besides the Conference Room, one of the Cultural Festival promotional posters, I think..... "

I lowered my voice as I reached the end of my response. I was not very good with manga, so while it does resembled what I saw, I couldn't say I was absolutely sure.

"That poster, huh?"

Fukube-san seems to know something about that poster, which made sense since he works with the Executive Committee, after all. While I was pondering all this time, his eyes were focused on something,

" .....Hmm, it does feel like that poster, but I'm not completely sure. But you might be able to figure out something if you compare the drawings,"

That's it, that's a wonderful idea!

"Oreki-san, can I borrow this manga for a while?"

Oreki-san leaned backwards as I made my request. Oh, looks like I moved too close to him again. Shaking his head gently, but rather than refusing my request, it was more a sense of feeling resigned,

"Sure thing. As long as you're feeling curious about something, nothing will get done until it's finished. ..... Just, make sure you return quickly, I'm not done reading it,"

"Yes, I'll be right back!"

I said as I held *Ashes at Dusk* manga towards my chest.

Both Fuku-chan and Chi-chan were looking forward to the third day of the Cultural Festival in order to boost the sale of *Hyouka*, yet they're not alone in wishing to sell all their anthologies in the final day. The same goes for the Manga Club.

Before we were even ready to begin the day, a few members were already waiting besides the opened door of the First Preparation Room in expectation of visitors. Thankfully, there were more people coming in than the previous two days. Personally I too was glad about it, with many people happily buying the character posters without even asking for the price. If we were serious, we would break even if we sell each poster at 100 yen, though it's actually taboo to be selling merchandise during the festival as per the school rules. Even though President Yuasa was not one to make such dangerous risks, she still sold many posters to anyone who would ask for them.

We've ended up digging a hole for ourselves.

As we didn't draw a lot of variations for the characters, all that's left is just to draw the characters in differing poses. Dressed in a khaki Mao suit with many pockets alongside an army cap today, there were many people who guessed as to what I was cosplaying, yet it was Kouchi-sempai who made the correct guess,

" .....Could it be, the parakeet chasing detective?" (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rainbow_Parakeet)

"Yes."

"More like the miniature version, huh?"

Ignoring the remark about my height, I noticed Kouchi-sempai was also dressed as a detective character - her character was more or less *the* original fighting game Chinese female warrior. (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chun-Li) She wore a qipao with pretty much nothing covering her thighs, I had no

idea whether she made this costume herself, but I had to admit it was pretty amazing in its attention to detail, and the spikes jutting out from her gold bracelets looked quite menacing.

Re-immersing myself in my work, I quickly left many thoughts behind me, like what went through yesterday, the "Juumoji" incident, and *Ashes at Dusk* as well. It's just that, if I forget it all, then I'll just find myself feeling miserable again once I'm done drawing. Having finished drawing one poster, I put my pen aside and begun erasing up the rough patches until I'm done.

"This one's done. Next,"

"Please draw this one for me,"

Alright, sir.

Placing the drawing paper before me, I was at a lost on what to do next. The classroom was now pretty packed, which means business is no longer as bad as before. *Zeamis* seems to be selling well. Kouchi-sempai's cosplay was quite popular with the older male visitors, and as a result with greeting them, she wasn't able to concentrate on her poster drawings. Her followers took on the duty from her, a glance at them showed they were neither as skilled or fast as she was. While I did not get along well with Kouchi-sempai, and I was at a lost for words at the conduct of her followers, I had to admit that she was pretty skilled in her drawing.

The water cup holding the pastel pen was becoming rather muddy, so someone decided it was time to change the water. It was a first year whom I had no recollection before. Instead of crossing through the middle of the room, which was packed, she took the long way via the side of the room. As she walked past me, her expression was one of relish, as in a dragon encountering a tiger, or a cat coming across a mouse.

"Oh my,"

As though on purpose, she suddenly lost her balance and splashed a few drops of water onto my desk.

I understood at once, as she was rather inactive until now. She was hear to

teach me a lesson for daring to speak up against her beloved Kouchi-sempai. She was probably content with just flicking a few drops at my way.

Yet, things did not end there. No one knew who bumped into whom, including myself, but someone must have bumped or tripped within the crowded room, and ended up colliding into the girl, who greatly lost her balance and yelled as she spilled the water in her cup.

The water ended up covering me all over.

" ....."

On the bright side, at least the water didn't splash on my head. A whole cup's worth of water splattered on my chest, and as a result, the clothes from my lower right shoulder all the way to my stomach was drenched with water, water that was stained with paint and supposed to be replaced. I think I stink.

The drawing paper of which I was still thinking of what to draw on was also soaked in a grey-yellowish colour.

"I, I'm so sorry Ibara! I didn't mean to….. "

The girl looked as though she was about to cry.

I wonder why, perhaps it was the sudden splash of cold water that numbed my senses, I don't know.

But I hardly felt angry. Taking a handkerchief out of my pocket, I wiped away the water droplets that was dripping from my shirt. The white handkerchief was quickly dyed in the same grey-yellowish colour.

Well, it is a khaki coloured shirt anyway, so the stain shouldn't stand out too much.

Still lively only a while ago, the First Preparation Room was now stunned in silence. Well, sorry about that. I stood up from my chair, finding the President, I said to her,

"I'm sorry, President. Please take care of the rest."

Unlike Kouchi-sempai, who couldn't possibly wear her costume outside the school premises, I was able to come to school in my costume without having to change. I was after all still quite resistant to wearing something that people would quickly associate with cosplaying, besides, Fuku-chan had said it would be hard to find any spot to change at school during this period. Though more importantly right now, I haven't got any uniform to change into as I left it at home.

Fortunately, my PE uniform was still here. Normally I would bring the clothes back for cleaning, but as our last PE lesson was cancelled, I didn't get to wear it and so I left it here at school. Finding a room where the Drama Club members change into their costume, I got myself changed.

Come to think of it, I wonder how the Classics Club is doing. Fuku-chan seems to be planning something, while there doesn't seem to be much that Chi-chan could do. As the one who made the ordering mistake, I should at least help out as much as I can in the final moment.

I could describe Kami High's PE track suit colour as "asagi-iro" (light blue), but that specific colour name would invoke memories of the legendary Shinsengumi, so I guess "water blue" would do for now. Anyway, wearing the water blue track suit, I headed towards the Geology Room. Entering the Special Block, as I slowly climbed up the stairs towards the third floor, I heard the sound of someone's slippers running from the corridor ahead.

(http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Traditional_colors_of_Japan)
(http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shinsengumi)

"Oh! Mayaka-san!"

It was Chi-chan, waving her hand happily. As I was about to ask why she was in such a hurry, she grabbed my wrist with her rather warm hands.

Speaking of which, we're on the stairs, so it was pretty dangerous,

"W, whoa! Chi-chan!"

Ignoring my protests, she began to spoke,

"Thank goodness, things would be much easier with your help. I'm not confident doing it myself, you see. Will you come with me? Are you free right now?"

With my help?

"Eh, hang on, just what is it that you want me to help you with?"

While she held on to my wrist with her right hand, in her left hand was an anthology-like booklet. It wasn't a really expensive booklet as its stapler binding was clearly visible. Anyway, I asked,

"What's that?"

As she turned it to show me its cover, I exclaimed,

"W, why on earth would you be holding this?!"

The cover showed a familiar illustration of a girl looking sideways, it was none other than *Ashes at Dusk*!

"Well, it's not exactly mine, but Oreki-san's,"

Then allow me to rephrase my question. Why on earth would Oreki get his hands on this? It was only sold in last year's Cultural Festival, in a pretty hidden corner by the corridor. While mostly unlikely, I did for a moment suspect whether Oreki had stolen the book from me. Without thinking, I stretched my hand to reach out to the book, to which Chi-chan held it to her chest and asked,

"Mayaka-san, could it be that you've seen this manga before?"

I withdrew my hand,

"Well. .... yeah, I have,"

"Then you must know the person who made this manga, right?"

The person who drew this manga? I wasn't sure whether to say it's Ajimu Takuha, the author's pen name, or Anjou Haruna, her real name. Perhaps

sensing my confusion, Chi-chan rephrased her question,

"I meant the person who drew this,"

"That I don't know,"

Thereupon she said enthusiastically,

"You see, I'm trying to find out if the person who drew the promotional poster for the Cultural Festival is the same person as the one who drew this manga! I'm *very* curious about it!"

I see.

Now I get it. Chi-chan would usually get curious about things and then proceed to find out the answer to it, I could never get myself as curious as she would. But now I'm beginning to understand how she feels whenever she's curious about something. I would often see different mangas where the art style is similar and wondered whether it's by the same author.

And now she's saying the person who drew the promotional poster for the Cultural Festival is the same as the one who drew *Ashes at Dusk*?

If that's true, then I must confirm it for myself. Once I do that, then I'll be able to find out the identities of both the writer *and* the illustrator. While the writer Anjou Haruna has already transferred schools, if the illustrator is still around, then it just might be possible for "Ajimu Takuha" to make a return.

Feeling excited, I raised my voice,

"Where's this poster right now?"

Chi-chan had begun to climb down the stairs while still holding my wrist. Without letting go, she replied,

"Besides the Conference Room!"

Okay, let's go!

The illustration showed a male and female student, with the caption "The 42nd Kanya Festival" written alongside the detailed schedules.

We were looking at the said poster's design. The contrast in shading was quite clear. As *Ashes at Dusk* was all in black and white while this was in colour, I must be more observant.

It was actually quite difficult in trying to determine whether the illustrations in a manga and a poster were by the same person.

Yet, this time, there wasn't much difficulty. Though the artist did change his style in his drawing of female characters, the style for male characters remained the same. Just one glance and I'd recognize the similarities. To make sure, I took a step back to look at the whole drawing, and then stepped forward to examine the details. While Chi-chan mentioned how the clothing fabric was drawn similarly, the decisive spot was actually the ears, where they're completely identical.

I turned to face Chi-chan,

"I'm 80-90 percent, no, I'm 99 percent sure it's the same person,"

Upon hearing that, Chi-chan placed her hand on her chest as though looking relieved,

"I see. Thank you very much, you've taken a burden off my chest,"

It seems like I've helped her a lot, so I smiled, which was something I haven't done in quite a while.

"Haha, you seemed really curious about it, weren't you?"

"Yes, but I wasn't confident in making the comparisons myself. .... "

"Me neither, it's not like I have any special methods for identifying the similarities,"

Now, I might as well satisfy my own curiosity, I knocked on the door to the Conference Room besides the notice board.

"Coming,"

A person opened the door. He looked just like the guy in the poster. A glance at his collar indicated he was a second year. He looked at us and wondered who we were.

"Greetings, Tanabe-san,"

Chi-chan said and bowed her head. This must be Tanabe, president of the Executive Committee then. He seemed like a nice guy. By the way, Chi-chan really is good with remembering people's names. While my own memory isn't that bad, but I can never reach Chi-chan's levels.

Upon hearing his name, Tanabe-sempai smiled,

"Well, hello, umm....."

"We're with the Classics Club,"

"Ah, of course. How may I help you this time?"

It's actually me that needs a favour this time. So I stepped forward in Chi-chan's place, and as we've formally met before, I skipped the formalities and asked,

"Excuse me, but would you happen to know who drew the poster in that notice board over there?"

Tanabe-sempai raised his eyebrows. There were many types of posters for the Cultural Festival after all, so it was probably hard even for him to answer right away. Of course it would help immensely if he could answer, but I shouldn't expect too much,

"Hmm, that one, right?"

"Yes, the one with the boy and girl standing together,"

After a short pause, Tanabe-sempai nodded gently many times. Did he recall something? As expected of the president of the Executive Committee. He replied briefly,

"That one would be by Kugayama,"

Eh?

Chi-chan asked from behind me,

"Would it be Kugayama Muneyoshi, the Student Council President?"

"Yeah, that Kugayama,"

It was a name I didn't expect. Even I knew who President Kugayama of the Student Council was. He gave me the impression of a sportsman-type image, but never did I expect him to be capable of drawing a manga.

Now I see, so he's the illustrator for Ajimu Takuha. His face began to appear in my mind even though I could hardly remember him before that. Meanwhile, Tanabe-sempai seemed pretty proud as he said,

"You guys are probably thinking 'Wow, so he could actually draw this well', right? He's pretty good, isn't he?"

"Yes! I think it's wonderful!"

"Haha, I'm sure he'd be glad to know if he heard it,"

I've now learned who the author and illustrator were, it's as though good things were happening in quick succession now, much like how the bad things came just before. Though like a fan chasing her idol, I had wanted to ask about whether Kugayama-sempai was using any pen name, but Tanabe-sempai probably wouldn't know. No matter, I'll just have to ask him in person afterwards. It could be just possible that he might reunite with Anjou Haruna to bring back the dream team.

If that happens..... I'd be dying to read their new work. An expectation suddenly floated in my mind.

After bowing politely, we exited the Conference Room.

Chi-chan was now smiling from ear to ear after fulfilling her objective. We now happily raced each other up the stairs towards the Geology Room.

"We know who it is now!"

Chitanda said as she ran in. It didn't take her that long to return, which I'm kind of grateful, but then again, she wasn't doing it for me, but to satisfy her own curiosity.

"Really? So is it the same person?"

Satoshi raised his head to ask, but without awaiting an answer, he continued,

"Huh? Mayaka?"

Sure enough, coming in behind Chitanda was Ibara, who was wearing her tracksuit when she's supposed to be cosplaying right now. Or could that tracksuit be part of her cosplay.....Nah, not possible. That's the PE uniform for Kamiyama High School no matter how you look at it. She looked cheery as though looking forward to something good to happen.

"Mayaka, isn't the Manga Club busy?"

Satoshi asked, to which she smiled gently and shook her head,

"Oh, I've had someone stand in for me,"

Someone to stand in for her? I'm not really familiar with the going-ons over there.

Like a spring, Chitanda moved towards me and placed the *Ashes at Dusk* copy on the desk,

"It's the same person, we also found out his name,"

"Really? That's great,"

"It's Kugayama Muneyoshi-san! I always think of him as a dignified person, but I never would have thought he would draw so well, so it's surprising,"

Who's that?

I looked at Satoshi,

"Do you know him?"

Upon hearing my question, Satoshi froze,
"H, Houtarou, you're joking, right?"

"Is he someone famous? I'm never really familiar with these strangers and freaks that you're acquainted, you know,"

Satoshi covered his eyes as though I'm a lost cause and shook his head slowly. Standing besides him, Ibara looked at me as though I was a fool and whispered,

"He's the Student Council President,"

The Student Council President, Kugayama Munayoshi.

"Oh, ohhhh! Of course..."

My voice trailed off as I spoke. And I thought his last name was read as "Rikuyama" all this time, not that I could tell them that. It's not like he's someone whom I wouldn't have heard of, but neither is he someone whom I care a great deal about. Trying to change the subject, I picked up the *Ashes at Dusk* and said,

"So, Kugayama is the illustrator for this Anshinin Takuha?"

Despite changing the subject, Satoshi continued with his "facepalm" as he covered his eyes and shook his head. Man, he's annoying. He removed his facepalm and said,

"What's this Anshinin you're talking about? Some kind of temple?"

"Isn't that how you read that?"

"Though it's spelled that way, it's read as 'Ajimu'. It's a place in Kyushu, known for its grapes,"

"Is that a city?"

"It's actually a town, legally speaking,"

Is that trivia supposed to be required knowledge? Besides, do the others know about this. ..... I looked at Chitanda with misgivings, to which she looked puzzled and said,

"There's a small print next to the name to indicate how it's pronounced..... Right here,"

Huh? Oh, there, the print's kinda small: "AJIMU TAKUHA"

Surprisingly, Ibara seemed quite sullen. Her eyes were wide, while her mouth was open as though wanting to say something. After seemingly reading the thing which Chitanda borrowed from me, she seemed kind of shocked. I wondered if it's something to do with her specific interest in mangas.

Standing besides me, Satoshi looked at the *Ashes at Dusk* copy and said,

"Well, if it's something that even Houtarou would approve, then surely this manga is something,"

"..... Ugh. ...."

Was it Ibara that made that strange grunt? Satoshi didn't seem to hear it as he continued speaking cheerfully,

"But this pen name, Ajimu Takuha, how should I put it? Surely they could come up with a shorter surname, three characters (A-JI-MU 安心院) is just a bit too unrefined,"

Should you be saying something like that?

"..... T, this can't be..... "

Chitanda staggered and lost her balance, since her surname had three characters, (CHI-TAN-DA 千反田)

"I, I didn't know my surname would be so unrefined..... "

"No! That's not what I mean!"
Satoshi panicked and waved his hands, trying to undo what he just said,

"When I said three characters, I was referring to given names! Yeah!"

Oh really?

Sensing my gaze, Satoshi moved his eyes away from him. Since my given name has three characters. (HOU-TA-ROU 奉太郎)

"Well, Houtarou's special, you see,"

I wonder how he made that deduction. Besides, the real problem is how on earth did you not notice that I had a three character name when you made that statement?

"So, Oreki's special, huh?"

Seems like Satoshi's finally realized what he's done, as tears begin to come out of his eyes. This was because Ibara's given name had three characters as well. (MA-YA-KA 摩耶花) It's not like three character names are rare at all, but in an attempt to cheer Chitanda up, he ended up digging his own grave. He ought to have said he was referring to pen-names instead of given names.

Letting the drama play on on its own, I returned my attention to the copy of *Ashes at Dusk* in my hand. It was an interesting manga, yet the afterword at the back seemed pretty relevant to what's been going on lately.

Unexpectedly, Ibara decided to stop her scolding of Satoshi and moved towards me,

"While President Kugayama did the illustrations, the writer is someone called Anjou Haruna,"

"Really?"

I said as I moved my gaze from the book,

"You familiar with this book?"

"It's my favourite manga. I bought one from the Cultural Festival last year,"

Ibara was not someone who would easily give her approval to something she likes, but I never expect her to utter the word "favourite". Well, now that's interesting. Looking at the book, she said without any tension,

"Hey Oreki, mind if you could lend me that?"

….. Man, this book is popular, isn't it? First Chitanda, now Ibara wants to borrow this? Though I had wanted to lend it to them, I replied,

"Sure thing, but just hang on for a while,"

"I can wait, but how long are you going to make me wait anyway?"

I thought for a while, and soon taped on the page with the afterword on it and said,

"At least until I've memorized this.....Once I make a copy of this, you can have it right away,"

Ibara looked at me in puzzlement. Maybe I wasn't good in explaining myself, to begin with, not even I was sure what purpose doing this would serve me. Maybe I should say "until I figure out whether this afterword serves any purpose or not".

Chitanda suddenly clasped her hands together,

"Oh yes, I have something to tell you,"

"What is it?"

"Well, I've been invited by the Broadcast Club to appear in their lunchtime broadcast,"

What?

"The program that was aired yesterday and the day before?"
"Yes,"

Satoshi whistled,

"That's fantastic, Chitanda-san! You did well to get the biggest media club in Kami High on board! This way we could use the 'Juumoji' incident to ensure 'Hyouka' gets sold!"

"Actually, it wasn't me who made the request. It was more like I was asked to appear on their programme."

"That's even better! Alright, as a frequent listener, allow me to teach you what kind of questions a guest like you should be anticipating. ...."

Well, guess we'll let Satoshi deal with the media stuff, I turned my gaze back to the afterword.

For some reason, I sensed some clues relating to "Juumoji" in here. Being in charge of the stall for three days, I no longer view this duty as just something I had to keep as simple as possible. For me, it's now to ensure the improvement of sales. In order to do that, "Juumoji" must be captured somehow. How ironic that Chitanda had suppressed her own curiosity in order to see that *Hyouka* sells well, and yet here I am, striving for the same objective in spite of my energy-saving principles. Resting my chin on my hands, my eyes landed on the pages of *Ashes at Dusk*, yet I made no effort to read it.

And so I began to think.

[118 COPIES REMAINING]

057 - ♥13

As I listened to Fukube-san's advice, I noticed Oreki-san had began to behave differently.

Mayaka-san and Oreki-san have been classmates since primary school, while Fukube-san was the closest male friend he had as far as I know.

And yet, why didn't they notice this change in behaviour?

Oreki-san would stop moving like that while his gaze would lose all focus.

….. That was when he would go into deep thought.

The outcome of such thinking was that he would come up with answers which I would totally not expect. And when the facts come out afterwards, it would always match his deductions.

And so, while listening to Fukube-san's words, I would keep glancing over at Oreki-san's direction.

058 - ♠16

" .....That's what I think, what about you, Houtarou?"

Hmm?
Hearing my name being called, I looked up, and saw Satoshi, Chitanda and Ibara all looking at me. I scratched my ear,

"Sorry, say that again?"

Satoshi gave a deep sigh,

"Houtarou. ..... We're discussing how to deal with the radio interview that will determine the fate of the Classics Club. This attitude won't do, man,"

Since when did we start having a discussion, and such an important one at that as well?

I then realized for some reason Chitanda was looking at me with her breath held back. Her eyes were large as always, but that's not the point,

"W, what is it, Chitanda?"

" .....What do you think?"

"Of what?"

"Nevermind. .... "

She sighed, though it was more natural than Satoshi's. W, what's going on? To have her sighing naturally at me, did I do something wrong?

Oh well, my thinking is a bit stuck at the moment. I was thinking of asking these guys for their opinion in order to formulate my thoughts.....

But Chitanda would get in the way.

Waving my hand, I gestured to Satoshi,

"C'mere,"

"Hmm? You said something?"
He said while moving over. I then realized I've been seated here for quite some time,

"Sorry, but can you come with me?"

"Where're we going in such a busy period?"

"It's related to this busy period anyway, but anywhere is fine,"

Seated on the desk and swinging her legs, Ibara looked at a distance and said,

"Could it have something to do with the 'Juumoji' Incident?"

Stop uttering your instincts out loud! Just as I thought, Chitanda's eyes instantly came alive,

"Eh! Is that true, Oreki-san?! Could you have thought of something?"

"No, no, I haven't,"

"Then, it's not related to the 'Juumoji' Incident...?"

While "misunderstandings should be dispelled right away" is more like Satoshi's motto, after asking me so earnestly, I just couldn't lie to her. She quickly saw through my hesitation,

" .....So, it does have something to do with it!"

"Well, no,"

Chitanda placed her palms before her chest and clutched them into fists. I wonder if she herself realized the change in her mood.

"I, I've been very curious to know about this. .....but why are you only telling Fukube-san..... ?"

She spoke in a softer than usual voice. She leaned her face forward that her eyes were covered by her bangs. At this rate, I'll definitely be cursed by a spell from her, I'll end up having to beg her for forgiveness.

What do I do? As I definitely did not want Chitanda to know my thinking this time.

Guess I'll have no choice but to think of something. I've never tried this trick before, I wonder if it would work. I made a serious face,

"You're right. I was about to tell Satoshi something related to the 'Juumoji' Incident, but,"

"Really? Then count me in..... "

"But it concerns something very obscene. Is that OK with you?"

Oh, looks like it worked. Quite effectively.

Forgive me, Chitanda, for committing sexual harassment on you just this once. I picked up the *Ashes at Dusk* copy besides the frozen Chitanda and walked out the room with Satoshi, who was smiling bitterly. Ibara looked at us with an icy stare that I could still feel the cold from behind.

"So, what's this obscene matter that you're about to tell me?"

Satoshi said after finally catching his breath from laughing too much.

The place I chose to speak with Satoshi was the roof of the connecting corridor. The reason was because there was hardly any festival-related activities up here and so was relatively quiet.

I replied with a sullen look,

"Sorry for dragging you out here,"

"Oh don't, it was fun. To have the 'Juumoji' Incident conclude at the Classics Club is exactly what I'd wish for,"

….. That wasn't exactly what I was thinking, though.

For a moment, Satoshi gave me a curious smile,

"Well, I have great expectations of you, Houtarou,"

Well, I'm not sure about that. I placed my hand on the handrail and said,

"It's not something that you could expect a lot from. These are just my gut instincts at work, and I'm just working my thoughts around them,"

"Well, there're a lot of things that one's gut instincts can lead to, besides the biggest question of who 'Juumoji' is,"

"That's something not even my gut instinct can tell me, besides, we don't even need to consider that at all,"

"You've found the missing link?"

Missing what?

Seeing my dumbstruck face, Satoshi smiled bitterly,

"The missing link. I'm asking if you have found the final piece of clue that links all the clubs targeted by 'Juumoji',"

Erm, that's not what I'm trying to say. Try again.

" .....Nah, not really,"

"Then, you've discovered 'Juumoji' have made some trivial mistakes?"

"Not that either,"

Satoshi suddenly stopped moving and looked at me intently with an unusually serious look, causing me to wince. He then spoke,

"None of those? This is a phantom thief case, a serial thief, with over a

thousand suspects we're talking about. And you're telling me you thought of something without even considering any missing link, or mistakes made by a suspect whose identity has not even been narrowed down?"

"Well. .... yeah, that's about it,"

"HOW?!"

For someone whose only interest in detective novels come from Sherlock Holmes, you're quite excited about this, aren't you, Satoshi? Well, this is Satoshi we're talking about, it won't be surprising if his interest went from Conan Doyle from one instance to Takagi Akimitsu the next. (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Akimitsu_Takagi)

"I've not gone around to figuring out who the culprit is just yet. I'm just trying to organize my thoughts, want to hear me out?"

I requested to Satoshi, to which he shrugged his shoulders for some reason. Before I could ask the reason, he reverted to his usual smile and said,

"Sure thing, man,"

He then placed his hand on the hand rail on the opposite side like me and leaned against it. We both felt the autumn breeze blowing between us.

Now, where should I start?

I paused for a while, As this discussion was not just to explain to Satoshi, but to organize my thinking for myself as well, I began by withdrawing my index finger on my right hand,

"First, why would 'Juumoji' target only ten clubs, taking one item from each club? This is due to his name, which literally means 'ten characters', which is where our deduction is mainly based on."

"Don't think anyone would object to such a theory by now."

Neither do I. I withdrew another finger,

"Second, why would 'Juumoji' leave behind a greeting card at the crime scene? Satoshi, do you still have one of those cards with you?"

"Yeah, right here,"

He said as he took out the card he found at The Cooking Club from his drawstring bag.

"I'm pretty sure a similar card was found at the Magic Club. You're not gonna tell me you're gonna trace where these cards are sold in order to find out who bought them, are you?"

Who would do such a bothersome thing?

Now that I think about it, the way "Juumoji" wrote his cards makes sense. Though easily overlooked at first, a lingering question remains, I thus withdrew my middle finger,

"Third, why would 'Juumoji' use the word 'lost' in his message? Why didn't he say he has 'stolen' from The Cooking Club?"

While my following deduction was based on just a whim, I withdrew my ring finger anyway,

"Fourth, why did he also leave behind a copy of the 'Kanya Festival Guide'?"

If he was trying to mimic the "A.B.C. Murders", then he must have referred to the festival guide, which contains the names of all the clubs. As it's a guide for visitors, obtaining one shouldn't be too hard.

"Oh, I've got a copy of that as well,"

Satoshi said and took out a copy of the "Kanya Festival Guide" from his

drawstring bag,

"This copy is the one that was found with the card at The Cooking Club,"

He's never one to miss any attention to detail. While I have a copy myself, I took it from him anyway.

Withdrawing the last little finger, I formed a fist with my right hand, pointing out an issue directly concerning the Classics Club,

"Fifth, why would 'Juumoji' target just the Gardening Club ([E]NGEI BU 園芸部), when he could also have targeted the Movie Study Club ([E]IGA KENKYUU KAI　映画研究会) and the Drama Club ([E]NGEKI BU　演劇部), which also begin with [E]? Similarly, why not target the Occult Studies Club ([O]KARUTO KEN オカルト研), which is a more natural choice for a name starting with [O], compared to The Cooking Club ([O] RYOURI KEN お料理研) with its unconventional name?"

"Ah, so it's related on whether he'll target the Classics Club ([KO]TEN BU 古典部) or the Miniature Club ([KO]USAKU BU　工作部), right?"

This was clearly a critical issue that needs to be addressed.

That said, I'm personally quite optimistic. Thanks to the Wall Newspaper Club, we've been mentioned as "one of the culprits last targets", plus we've secured an interview with the Broadcast Club, so we've more or less made our presence clear.

From my clenched fist, I released my index finger,

"Sixth, when I was reading my manga, you told me how 'Juumoji' skipped past [KU] and went straight for [KE], you must've thought I didn't paid much attention to this, didn't you?..... On the contrary, this is the most peculiar point,"

"But I thought he was only doing it just to avoid getting caught. Like I said, the Global Act Club ([GU]RO-BARU AKUTO KURABU グローバルアクトクラブ) was too heavily guarded for him to be able to steal anything,"

Though I get where he's coming from, surely he must have realized how strange this is. Anyway, I have one more issue to raise, so I released my middle finger,

"Seventh,"

I opened the *Ashes at Dusk* copy I had with me and showed Satoshi the afterword, and pointed at the part that read "plans on writing a mystery story... based on one or two of Agatha Christie's most famous works", and asked,

"Satoshi, what famous work of Christie's can you think of?"

Without hesitation, Satoshi replied,

"Let's see, there's *And Then There Were None*, *Murder on the Orient Express*, *The Murder of Roger Ackryod*, and *The A.B.C. Murders*..... namely these four,"

I nodded,

"I would also add *The Mysterious Affair at Styles* to that list, but that'll do. The manga that would be titled *The Kudryavka Sequence* will be based on one of these 'most famous works', which one do you think it is?"

Satoshi wouldn't be too familiar when it comes to the details of detective fiction, not unlike me. But for someone who takes pride in his database, he should at least have an idea of which 'most famous work' it could be. Crossing his arms and thinking for about ten seconds or so, he spoke cautiously,

"If I remember correctly, Kudryavka's the name of a dog that was sent to space via a rocket, and died on it when its oxygen supply ran out. She died believing she was returning to the planet below her."

"Is that all?"

Who would seriously understand what a dog thinks anyway?

"Anyway, *And Then There Were None* would fit the bill the most. But since the title contains the word 'sequence', then it should be *The A.B.C. Murders*,"

"I agree. If the manga was about all the suspects being removed one by one, then the victims being specifically told that they'd be next would make no sense. So I'm leaning toward *A.B.C.*,"

"Is that so? Since 'Kudryavka' invokes the meaning of an untimely death, whereas *A.B.C.* is more like a game, and doesn't feel that associated with death. So I'm for *There Were None*,"

That so?

….. No matter, this is just me organizing my thoughts, so there was no need to reach any consensus.

"I feel like I'm getting where you're going with this, Houtarou,"

Satoshi whispered.

Before he said what he wanted to say, I needed to confirm something with him,

"Satoshi, is there a manga called *The Kudryavka Sequence* on sale in the festival this year?"

" No, never heard of it. As all items being sold need to go through the General Committee for approval, and would be duly noted in our records. If it's the Manga Club selling, Mayaka would have told us about it,"

That should do. I looked towards the sky,

"*Ashes at Dusk* was being sold in last year's Kamiyama High School Cultural Festival, its afterword mentions a new issue will be made the following year based on one of Christie's most famous works. It's now deduced that it's either based on *And Then There Were None* or *The A.B.C. Murders*. Just to be safe, let us also include *Orient Express* and *Roger Ackroyd* as well,

"And now, we have come to the year which the afterword has mentioned, and we are witnessing a series of events that is similar to Christie's *A.B.C. Murders*, which matches my seventh point. Are all these events coincidental?"

"Houtarou,"

Satoshi continued where I left off,

"Are you saying that *Ashes at Dusk* has foretold the *Jumoji* incident?"

Well, I didn't exactly come to such a conclusion yet, anyway,

"If it sounds too good to be true to make these connections between *Ashes at Dusk* and *The Kudryavka Sequence* with the *Juumoji* incident, then what other connection could there be? *Juumoji* couldn't possibly be doing this just for fun after waiting for a year, could he?"

Of course, this was a rhetorical question. There was no way he was doing this for fun. Satoshi remained silent, implicitly agreeing that I was right.

"Satoshi, there is a meaning behind all this, or rather, a motive. He didn't make any warning beforehand, neither did he attempt to make himself known, plus the stuff he's stolen, like the water gun and candles, these weren't stolen for fun. I get a feeling someone is ensuring *Juumoji* accomplishes his task smoothly without causing any trouble to other clubs,

"And yet, skipping [KU] does not match his profile. If he had intended to target clubs starting with [KU], he would have done so regardless, so why avoid it. ?"

I stopped here, for any further would require more thinking.

After a brief silence, Satoshi slowy spoke,

" .....I'm going back. I can't just let Chitanda-san go to the interview unprepared,"

He said with a bitter smile.

"I guess so. We're counting on you,"

"What about you, Houtarou?"

"I'm just gonna have a further look at the stuff you gave me,"

Nodding, he turned and walked away.

Ah, yes, I nearly forgot. Regardless of *Juumoji's* intention, I gotta make sure the Classics Club gets the attention it needs. Though I don't think Satoshi and Ibara would forget, I spoke just in case,

"Satoshi, have Chitanda mention about us preparing some item that begins with [KO] in her interview,"

Standing and turning his head, Satoshi gave a mischievous smile,

"A bait to draw in the customers, huh? We've gone to such lengths to make ourselves the target after all, so it wouldn't be fun if we don't prepare something. ..... No worries, I'll think of something. Most likely something like 'completed manuscripts' ([KO]URYOU GENKOU 校了原稿) Never thought you'd think this far, Houtarou,"

Oh, you flatter me.

"Oh and we're counting on you to watch the stall,"

He said and walked away while waving his hand with his back faced to me.

Talking with someone sure does help in organizing one's thoughts. After discussing with Satoshi, I arrived at one possibility. It was a bold guess, I believe.

I looked at the greeting card, the copy of the "Kanya Festival Guide" and *Ashes at Dusk*.

It would have been convenient for me to do this indoors, but for some reason, I was examining them under the breezy outdoors.

Think.

I have the materials. All that's left is to organize them nicely.

Deduce, and organize those thoughts.

This breeze is kind of chilly.....

[118 COPIES REMAINING]

059 - ♣19

Before reentering the campus building, I turned to look at Houtarou once more.

Leaning against a handrail, he was looking at the autumn sky.
I wonder where his thoughts were leading him right now. I could never know.

I couldn't know.

The smile in my mouth disappeared.

As the breeze was kind of chilly, I lowered my eyes.

5.2 - "Juumoji" vs The Classics Club

061 - ♥14

I feel my heart racing.

In situations like these, there's a way of staying calm, and that is to treat everyone looking at you as pumpkins. Since my family grows pumpkins as well, it was quite an easy vegetable to visualize. I'll be able to calm down will calm down should calm down...

Oh no! But right before me wasn't a person, but a microphone!

Then I must try another method. I'll try tracing the character for "person" (人) on my palm and then "swallow" it. (Note: A traditional Japanese charm.)

Writing the word three times, I swallowed it, by which time I realized.

The character I wrote on my palm wasn't "person", but "enter" (入). (Note: slightly different stroke sequence between 人 and 入.)

"We'll begin as soon as the music ends. You ready?"

"Y, yes."

"Music ending in five, four, three. ...."

"And that was *Breathe* by *The Prodigy*!"[32]

"Now then, let us begin with the topic that's trending in the Kanya Festival right now. Our guest for the final day is Chitanda Eru-san of Class 1A, who is the president of the Classics Club! *(Applause)* Now that's a great applause, even though it's just the sound effects box."

" ....."

"Anyway, we've now come to the final day of the Kanya Festival. The topic of the day is of course the 'Juumoji' Incident. In case you haven't already heard, it's about a series of thefts from various clubs right after the festival started. Outrageous, isn't it? *(Says excitedly)* So now, this thief is kind of artistic, shall we say? He first targeted the A Capella Club, then the Go Club, followed by the Fortune Telling Association and Gardening Club, following the order of the Gojuuon sequence. The items being stolen are namely, water, Go stones, the Tarot Wheel of Fortune card, and *(Purposely asks)* what was it again?"

"*(Quickly answers)* An AK."

"Yes, that's it. *(Asks casually)* What's an AK anyway?"

"It's a water gun. The Gardening Club uses it as a fire precaution."

"I see, you've done your research well. If you've read the *Kami High Monthly Extra Edition*, then you'd already know this, but Chitanda-san's Classics Club happens to be this thief's final target. Invincible he may seem, the thief did leave a hint that he would target ten clubs, as his name 'Juumoji' (ten characters) suggest, starting from clubs that start with [A] all the way down to [KO]. So how do you feel right now?"

"Oh yes, *(brief pause)* with everyone's help, we would be able to catch 'Juuomoji' in his act."

"Oh really? *(Delighted)* For a quiet person like you, you're pretty confident!"

"Oh, not really."

"*(Attempting to make conversation flow)* But you still think you can catch him?"

" .....The Classics Club is located on the fourth floor of the Special Block, right at the corner. It's where the Geology Room is. *(Without hesitation)* As you would know, the Geology Room, like most classrooms located in the building's corners, has only one exit. It is an environment that is unfavourable to the culprit.

With everyone's help, in case he does succeed with the theft, he would not be able to escape easily."

"And how would they help?"

"By coming to the Geology Room. We've only got four members in the Classics Club, so we're short in numbers when it comes to guarding the place. *Says passionately in order to leave an impression* We're counting on everyone's help!"

"Hmm, *(Says soberly)* but isn't that request a bit lacking in something?"

"*(Pauses briefly)* Actually, in order to confront 'Juumoji', we have prepared something."

"Now that's more like it. So, *(Lowers voice slightly)* what have you prepared?"

"I'm not sure if you could call it a prepared item.

"In these three days, 'Juumoji' has come close to accomplishing his ten character sequence. But he has yet to find anything that starts with [KO] in the Classics Club. Knowing he's not one to quit easily, 'Juumoji' would definitely fulfill the expectation of everyone, who is eager to find out who he is.

For that purpose, *(Speaks slowly)* we have prepared a manuscript for our club anthology *Hyouka*."

"*(Amazed)* Manuscript?"

"Yes. *Hyouka* is the name for our club anthology, it's a strange name, isn't it? Actually hidden in this name is a secret that concerns the Kamiyama High School Cultural Festival, or the 'Kanya Festival' for short. For anyone who's interested, please do come and buy a copy to find out for yourselves."

"A secret concerning the Kanya Festival, huh? Now I'm curious. But what's that got to do with 'Juumoji'?"

"Oh, I'm sorry, I meant the manuscript for that anthology. But it's not just

any manuscript, but a manuscript that has been proofread for printing. Thus a 'Proofread Manuscrip'. ([KO]URYOU GENKOU 校了原稿)"

"*Delighted* Aha, I see! In other words, an item that begins with [KO]. So this is what you've prepared in order to invite 'Juumoji' to a showdown, right?"

"Well, *A bit embarrassed* something like that. .....Though it's not like we're not anxious about it."

"How so?"

"The person known as 'Juumoji' has been able to carry out his acts without being caught so far, so he's a very alert and bold individual. Since everyone's attention would be on us, his final target, we would of course feel a bit anxious. *(Emphasizes slowly)* Maybe there's another way, but we couldn't think of anything better."

"I see, so you're serious about this showdown?"

"Yes, we are. *(Smiles and speaks gently)* As we've purposely arranged a target item, while still feeling helpless at not knowing if it would be stolen. So we would like as many people as possible to come to the Geology Room."

"And there we have it.....*(Speaks with vigour)* The final target, the Classics Club, is all prepared! All that's missing is people! And they're seeking people interested in finding out 'Juumoji's' identity, or even desire to catch him themselves. That said, it may still be possible for 'Juumoji' to succeed with his act despite all the security .....In anycase, do come to the Classics Club clubroom, located in the Geology Room on the fourth floor of the Special Block this afternoon.

"That was our guest Chitanda Eru-san of Class 1-A, president of the Classics Club. Thank you very much for your time, and I wish you good luck!"

"Thank you, we'll do our best."

The mike turned off.

I proceeded to give a deep sigh.

I've managed to mention every memo that Fukube-san and Mayaka-san wrote, including "Proofread Manuscript", "Introduce *Hyouka's* Contents" and "Location of Clubroom". Besides these, I've also written along the side Irisu-san advices, "Do not make requests that demand the favour to be repaid" and "Do not make people think the problem is huge". For the first advice, I made sure there's no favour that needs to be repaid, and for the second advice, I made no mention of the fact that we still had many copies of *Hyouka* that remained unsold. I'm putting into practice the advice of making people think that "only they could accomplish this request of mine". Thanks to these preparations and advice, I had managed to encourage myself to do this broadcast. I closed my eyes and thanked everyone who had given me their strength from the bottom of my heart.

"Hey, you're pretty good at this. Though hardly eloquent, but you've managed to convey what you wanted to say well,"

Yoshino-san said as he tapped gently on my shoulder.

I suddenly felt a sting. Oh, no, I wasn't referring to Yoshino-san's words, but a discomfort within my heart. I've been aware of this feeling during this whole festival. And right now, after the broadcast, I felt it prickling at me. It's hard for me to describe in words.....

No, I should only think of the Classics Club for now. Will we be able to pull this off? We'll find out at the Geology Room later on. Placing my hand on my chest, I made a deep breath.

062 - ♠18

I took a look at my watch, it was past two o'clock.

I did so while handing a copy of *Hyouka* to the expressionless man before me,

"That'll be 200 yen, please."

After he promptly paid up, he was followed by another customer right behind.

This was not a dream from an afternoon nap. There were more customers coming, more copies were being sold. This was reality. The Geology Room was packed with people.

According to Satoshi, the Global Act Club room was also quite packed earlier this morning. If they could attract that many people just for the purpose of catching "Juumoji", then it's only natural that as his final target, we would also get just as many, especially when we've advertised ourselves on the radio broadcast. As a result, we were able to sell off the *Hyouka* copies quite quickly, compared to before when only up to two copies per hour were being sold.

Of course, having many people gathered alone does not guarantee sales. So most of the credit for this has to go to Chitanda, joining up well with Satoshi's down-to-earth PR. As another copy was sold, I came to be amazed by their dynamism.

Right now, they too were in the club room, so too was Ibara in her tracksuit, who came despite her duties with the Manga Club.

Those three stood at the centre of the room, forming a triangle with their backs facing outwards, while extended their arms firmly. Within that triangle was another triangle made of yellow stickers plastered on a table.

Within the centre of these two triangles was a stack of A4 paper. The cover sheet on top read *Hyouka Manuscript*. This was the "Proofread Manuscript"

bait that the Classics Club was using to lure "Juumoji" out.

By the way, those were the manuscripts for Ibara's section. Since Chitanda and I wrote too many for our sections, while Satoshi wrote too little.

Those three guarded the manuscripts, emphasizing the showdown between the Classics Club and "Juumoji" to the crowd. There was no way to know when "Juumoji" will strike. The crowd who came was either feeling bored, or maybe it's due to Satoshi's advertising, they all decided to buy a copy of *Hyouka* from me. I couldn't see it from where I was sitting, but there's a makeshift illustrated poster drawn by Ibara that was posted on the door. The showdown felt like something from a Spaghetti Western, which was kind of embarrassing when you calmly think about it, but perhaps it wasn't so bad if it's to keep the Kami High students entertained till the very end of the festival.

As I was busy selling the *Hyouka* copies, I had no way of knowing...

Hey, I like the sound of that, let me repeat.

As I was ***busy*** *selling the* Hyouka *copies*, I had no way of knowing whether "Juumoji" had already sneaked in among the uniformed students or visitors in their casual wear, trying to find an opportunity to break through the triangle guard formation of Chitanda, Satoshi and Ibara. Eyeing the heavily guarded manuscript and the copies of *Hyouka*, I thought to myself *Please don't make your move yet*, as I hoped to extend the moment for as long as possible in order to sell as many copies as I could.

Regardless of whether they're detective-wannabes or just curious onlookers, I couldn't help but listen in on their conversations:

"..... Is he really gonna come..... "

"..... He managed to pull it off this morning. .... "

"..... I think this is just a staged show by the Student Council....."

"..... Hey, isn't this *To Terra*. ..the book that you said you were reading a while ago. .... "

" .....Aren't they overdoing this a bit? There's no way he'd be able to get through such heavy security..... "

"..... Not if he's Lupin..... "

Unfortunately, "Juumoji" is no Lupin, but a mere student of Kamiyama High School. He's not gonna pull some amazing stunt in order to get his hands on those heavily guarded manuscripts. Ibara looked quite anxious, since the "Juumoji" incident wouldn't be solved even if they were to successfully guard the manuscripts.

I continued to observe.

Hyouka was still selling. Five copies, ten copies, twenty copies.

Time was passing. Five minutes, ten minutes, twenty minutes.

I opened the boxes that I thought would never be opened, and slowly removed the *Hyouka* copies within it, until I could see the bottom of the boxes. The rate at which we're selling was simply fantastic. So this was what it feels to be able to do a good business, it feels great, really. I felt like singing. If I weren't an energy saving person, I might just aim to go into business myself based on this experience.

But I guess the limit has more or less been reached. After selling about eighty copies, the sales started slowing down, and I could begin to hear the restless mumblings of the curious onlookers, and I guess our three guards were starting to feel uncomfortable as well. We mustn't be too greedy when it comes to things like these, after all. It was probably time someone put an end to this.

" ....."

I moved my gaze towards the centre of the crowd.

And then it happened.

A flash sparked.

" ...Whoa!"

I had no idea who yell in panic, but the onlookers all turned to whomever made the scream.
"Huh?

"W, what's going on?"

Everyone realized something had happened, with Chitanda and Ibara being one of the last ones to know, since they had their backs to it. In other words, something was happening to the "Proofread Manuscript" they were guarding.

The manuscript which was supposed to be safe suddenly burst into flames.

The initial flash was so vivid it had stunned everyone.

The fire wasn't particularly strong, but rather a trickle of tiny flames. As it happened so quickly, for a moment, nobody was able to react. Turning to see what was happening behind her, Chitanda was so shocked at what she saw that she drew back.

Someone shouted,

"Fire! Put it out!"

As though reacting on impulse, Satoshi was the first to respond as he frantically shook the flames off the manuscript.

Most of the flames had already gone out quickly, but Satoshi still continued to shake the manuscript, smacking them many times with his sleeves.

Thanks to his quick reaction, the flames had completely gone out. But the manuscript was clearly burned badly, that brief moment was all it needed for it to happen. Satoshi held the manuscript up in the air for all to see.

It was clear to everyone that a hole had been burned through the stack of proofread manuscripts.

Satoshi looked clearly frustrated as he moved his lips, muttering "We've been hit."

After the shock, the whispers began to spread,
"..... Was that him. ...."

"..... 'Juumoji'? It can't be. ...."

"..... The thing's all burned up. ...."

"..... No way the manuscript can survive that. ...."

The mumblings got more and more excited.

Another voice exclaimed,

"He must have left a notice. Search for it!"

The crowd quickly split into the curious onlookers and the detective-wannabes, with the former discussing excitedly with their friends while the latter began looking around furiously.

….. Very soon the message was found. It was dropped on the floor, along with a copy of *Hyouka* which many people had stepped on. Inserted within the pages of the badly trampled copy of our anthology was a copy of the "Kanya Festival Guide", and of course, the greeting card that came with it. It was a girl who discovered it.

"Let me see that!"

Satoshi drew near to her, and next to Satoshi,

"You've gotta be kidding me!"

Ibara too arrived. I also walked over from my seat, carrying the money box with me and took a peek over Satoshi's shoulder.

It was a similar greeting card from before, written in the similar curt style:
This completes the "Ten Characters".

And now Chitanda too came to have a look.

Covering her mouth with her eyes wide opened, she was so shocked she couldn't even stand properly.

[COPIES REMAINING: PENDING]

5.3 - The Curtain Closes

063 - ♣20

The special, three-day long festive atmosphere is quickly coming to an end. And it was time for me and the General Committee to prepare for the Closing Ceremony.

The phantom thief "Juumoji" had magnificently achieved his final objective and made the Classics Club lose its proofread manuscript. The result was announced by the Wall Newspaper Club, while the details were spread via word of mouth. With the last target being taken down, the "Juumoji" Incident has come to an end. And as though the final event of the Kamiyama High School Cultural Festival has ended, everyone realized the Cultural Festival too is coming to an end.

As the Closing Ceremony approaches, I walked towards Mayaka, dressed in a track suit. I never did asked why she was wearing such a track suit for nearly the whole day today. Come to think of it, Houtarou got a bruise on his eyebrow for correctly guessing something. But I'm not as good as he is, and I was unable to ask her properly.

Yet, as though completely forgetting about the Manga Study Club, Mayaka was mad at something else entirely,

"I don't believe this! How did he manage to bring fire in? Did he threw matches? But we didn't find any....."

She was like that for a while now. She must have thought acting as guards was just a marketing ploy to sell our *Hyouka* anthologies, but we never thought "Juumoji" would actually appear, so she was pretty shocked. All I could do was casually shrug my shoulders to tell her I wouldn't know the answer to her question either. After all, I much prefer seeing Mayaka look so worked up than dejected.

We walked down the stairs to the first floor.

"Hey, Fukube,"

Someone called me, it was Tani-kun.

I made an abjected smile as befitting of a loser. As I really have lost, so it was not a hard expression to make. Though it was not Tani-kun that I had lost to.

"Hey, Tani-kun. As you see, we got had. You were at the Geology Room, right?"

"Of course,"

Yet, Tani-kun spoke with less confidence than before. That's to be expected. I went on to ask,

"So, Tani-kun, did you manage to find out who 'Juumoji' was?"

Tani-kun's face scowled for an instance. He probably felt a sense of humiliation. Yet he quickly went back to his relaxed demeanor, and said in a graceful manner,

"Nope, I haven't,"

"I see,"

"Well, there were too little clues. With so little information, one could never come to any conclusion no matter how much they would think about it,"

There were indeed too little clues.

"Then, what about you? Did you figure out something?"

He smiled while asking with serious eyes, I smiled bitterly and shook my head. Tani-kun quickly show a sign of relief,

"I see, I see. Even you couldn't solve it. And I had expected something of you,"

"Sorry to let you down."

"Don't worry about it. Well, it was a fun Cultural Festival. I'll have to repay you for the Cooking Club clue you gave me someday,"

Come to think of it, I did tell him something like that, but it was quite some time ago.

We waved at each other and walked our separate paths. Mayaka then asked,

"Your friend?"

..... Hmm, I wonder?

"Not exactly a friend,"

"Then what?"

"Hmm, let's see, you could say he's just a classmate,"

I gave it some thought,

"He's bad in Languages, I think,"

"So he flunked his tests often?"

"Not really. How should I say it, it's the way he uses his words that's weird,"

Mayaka raised her eyebrows, indicating that I was saying something strange again. I smiled and explained,

"He uses the word 'expect' a bit too lightly,"

" .....What's wrong with that? It's not like it's a taboo word,"

"Uh uh,"

I raised my right index finger and waved it two, three times,

"This is a really complex subject. I'll explain to you once the Cultural Festival is over,"

"Um, Fuku-chan,"

"One should not use the word 'expect' when one is confident of himself,"

I interrupted Mayaka before she could continue, which was kind of rare. Mayaka shut her mouth and held back whatever it was she had wanted to say.

Looking down the decorated corridor, I smiled. I was pretty good at smiling, to the point of not knowing how to make a serious face.

"Dictionaries usually have a preset definition for a word. I myself am not really a person that quotes from dictionaries. So, Mayaka, while I wouldn't know how a dictionary would define this word, but for me, 'Expect' is only something you say when you've given up,"
" ....."

I really hoped she would have said something in response, or I'm just talking to myself,

"One only expects when one is depleted of time, resources or energy. The reason Nelson said 'England expects that every man will do his duty' to his men was because even Nelson himself wasn't so sure if he could defeat France. One only expects when one has run out of all other options.

"Tani-kun doesn't really expect anything from me, as he thought he was able to figure something out by himself. It's concerning how young people these days misuse their words, there should be a reform of the Japanese Language education. You only use the word 'expect' in occasions like....."

As expected of Mayaka. Just when I thought she was merely listening, she spoke with her usual annoyed tone,

"Like how Oreki beat you in figuring something out?"

Bravo. I clapped my hands,

" .....Wow, how'd you know? I didn't even tell anybody about it,"

"If it's Fuku-chan, I could tell just by looking,"

Was I really the type to show stuff on my face?

Approaching the gymnasium, the corridor was still full of smiling students from Kami High. Everyone either felt fully satisfied, or wanted to spend as much fun as they could in these three days. Dwarfed by such laughter, we could hardly hear each other speak. And so I pretended not to hear Mayaka's reply.

" .....Fuku-chan, did you want to beat Oreki that much?"

Yet I was unable to ignore that. No, that's not it, that's not what I had intended, but.....

"Well, it's complicated for guys. You wouldn't understand even if I explained it to you,"

Glancing sideways at me, Mayaka muttered something without making any sound. I managed to make out "That's not true" by her lip movements. It's just that Mayaka rarely makes such a quiet expression, and I've not seen her like that before.

So in response, I cheerfully placed my hands behind my head and said,

"I should have realized from the start now that I think about it. I was careless. He's the sort that would finish things off neatly without making any unnecessary movements for not even a moment,"

Mayaka tilted her head to signal she doesn't understand what I was saying. Entering the connecting passageway, we got closer to the gymnasium where the Closing Ceremony will be held. With a voice that the Kami High Students around us could hear, I spoke clearly. After all, this was something I felt no shame in saying as I was very sure of it,

"I can't come to any conclusions just based on my own database alone."

Mayaka smiled bitterly in response.

064 - ♥15

In the end, Irisu-san was able to sell all 30 copies of *Hyouka* that I gave to her, that's 15% of the total amount of copies. I never thought we would be able to sell them off via this method, so I was at a lost at how to thank her.

Handing me a small nylon bag containing the proceedings, Irisu-san said softly,

"If I could, I had wanted to sell them at the full price,"

"No, that's more than enough,"

Those 30 copies were sold at a 50 yen discount, still 150 yen is worth more than nothing. It's better to sell these 30 copies at a discount than discard them completely, after all.

While I haven't heard the exact figures from Oreki-san, but I hear that he's sold quite a lot of copies in the Geology Room. I was able to feel some relief at last after such a long anxious Cultural Festival. After that..... yes, all that's left is to investigate the person known as "Juumoji-san". I'll do this. There's nothing that can stop me.

After giving my awkward thanks, I was about to return when Irisu-san stopped me.

"Yes?"

"Hmm..... I think I'd better say this to you now.

It is rare for Irisu-san to be so hesitant with her words. I wonder if it's something important? I stood up straight and replied,

"Yes, what is it?"

She spoke as though carefully choosing her words,

"My advice..... I heard you using it on the school radio broadcast."

Oh, the school radio broadcast. Anyone in school would have heard that broadcast. Even though I knew that already, when being told of that fact, it still felt a little embarrassing.

Still, it was thanks to Irisu-san that my radio interview went smoothly. That's right, I must thank her properly for this,

"It's thanks to Irisu-san that I was able to do this properly, I....."

"It's about that,"

Irisu-san interrupted me with a forceful tone,

"I was too naive. I never thought you would reenact what I had advised.

"I knew what your intention was when you agreed to appear on that radio programme. You probably brought a memo along with you when you went, right? So I'm going to tell you clearly, you're not suited for this sort of thing."

" ....."

Without realizing, I nodded gently.

Once she began, Irisu-san showed no sign of stopping,

"Unless I'm mistaken, I always knew you are the type to not want to rely on the help of others.

"Yet, I don't think you should go on manipulating expectations of other people like that. With the way way you spoke and demeanor you put on, it makes you sound very dependent. While it's a very effective way to give someone the illusion that they're reliable. Yet it's risky for you to go on like that, not just in the long term, but in the short term as well,"

She gave a very serious advice.

She was right. I realized I was very uncomfortable with myself after that radio broadcast. During that time, or rather, during these three days, I wondered if I was being too dependent on other people.

Maybe I was too conscious of my relationship with Oreki-san. Anxiously aware that I was constantly making him do the explanation on things I don't understand, without even trying to figure it out myself.

However.

To rely on this many people, and to get some deal out of them was, how should I say this?..... Yes, to quote from Oreki-san, this goes against my personal creed.

I think it's problematic to rely on someone else to solve one's own problems. While it is true that the Classics Club was unable to sell all the anthologies on its own, but I'm not used to such a solution. I was unable to distinguish between 'expectation' and 'reliance'. Could my fatigue last night be related to such anxieties?

With some trepidation, I asked,

"Did I really sound that dependent?"

Irusu-san raised her hand to the side of her face, and lifted her little finger.

" .....Girlfriend?"

"No, I mean you sounded as dependent as the tip of my finger,"

Irisu-san continued,

"If you keep on with such an act, sooner or later pretending can turn into your reality. It's true that you've never negotiated like that before. .....but in that case, you should have placed your expectations on people who could do the task. What I'm trying to say is, you should quit with such unskilled maneuvering and just say what you want to say. While going straight to the point is often your weakness, on the other hand, it could also be your greatest weapon..... You understand what I mean?"

Yes, I do. Irisu-san was worried about me.

Though with apologies to her, she may be worrying too much. So I gave her a reassuring smile andsaid,

"Yes, I was thinking the same thing..... I just felt I wasn't suited for such a thing. Umm, in other words. ..... I'm tired of it."

Irisu-san smiled gently in response.

065 - ♦12

After the Closing Ceremony had ended, the Kamiyama High School Cultural Festival officially comes to an end. Though normal lessons won't resume right away, as before that, all students are required to clean up the school before leaving.

Borrowing something from Oreki, I took this moment to head to the First Preparation Room. I didn't feel like heading to the Manga Club, and I wasn't thinking of defeating Kouchi-sempai now of all times. Still, I had wanted to at least show her *Ashes at Dusk*. My position in the Manga Club and its policy during the Cultural Festival notwithstanding, I simply wanted to show it to her as a fellow manga lover.

As luck would have it, Kouchi-sempai was outside the classroom speaking with President Yuasa. I called her out from some distance,

"Sempai,"

They both turned around,

" ..... Oh, Ibara,"

Kouchi-sempai sighed, and asked with her usual upright demeanor,

"Yes, what is it?"

"I know it's a little late, but, here. ...."

I presented the *Ashes at Dusk* copy to her,
"I've brought it, the manga that I believe would become a classic one day,"

Kouchi-sempai's gaze sharpened as though it would shoot through my chest. She looked at the copy of *Ashes at Dusk* with quite some bitterness before sighing deeply,

"Let's go somewhere else,"

The place she took me was the same place I spoke with President Yuasa, the roof of the connecting corridor. Leaning on the handrail, Kouchi-sempai glanced down at the courtyard below. I stood a few paces from her and watched her back. In the background, we could hear the sound of people cleaning things up, tearing down their makeshift stalls. The breeze blowing in the late afternoon felt a little chilly.

I continued to stand behind her as she stared at the courtyard. From this angle, her figure looked rather small. She spoke while still facing her back to me,

" ..... So you really brought it with you?"

"Yes. Though it's not exactly mine,"

I realized my lips were getting dry, and licked them before continuing,

"Sempai, you knew about this manga, didn't you?"

"Yuasa told you, didn't she? She can be pretty nosey sometimes,"

"She said you were friends with the author of this manga,"

Though I could not see as she was facing her back to me, I could feel as though she was smiling gently,
"Friend, huh? I wonder how Haruna's doing now. I did ask for her number, just in case. I haven't spoken to her for so long now,"

"Have you read this manga?"

There was no reply.

My knees were trembling, but not because it was cold. While I was used to brow beating Fuku-chan, I had never pressed a question on someone else like this before..... I was scared, so much my heart was beating faster and my legs trembled.

Though as there was only the two of us, no one would notice how scared I

was. I tightened my fists further,

" .....I, understand what you're trying to say. Whether a manga is interesting or not is purely subjective, I also understand that it's up to every individual to decide whether a manga suits oneself or not.

"But, I still think this is incorrect. Wouldn't that be a bit too futile?"

Sempai's voice was extremely calm,

"Well, for *Ashes at Dusk*, it's on the serious side, you know. If my preference was comedy, I wouldn't bother reading it. Isn't that the case?"

"No, it isn't. One would stop reading only after one has started. So I'm sure that this manga has that ability to make you understand once you read it,"

"Only to those who'd understand the difference."

"Kouchi-sempai!"

Sempai continued to face her back towards me without turning around. Slowly putting her hand in her breast pocket, she took something out. It sounded like a pen as I could hear her removing the cap. She then began to scribble something on the handrail.

" .....I was joking,"
"Eh?"

I thought I had heard wrong, yet Kouchi-sempai repeated herself,

"I was only joking. Of course I'd understand. You really think I'd seriously say everyone's work is worth the same subjectively? You sure can't take a joke, silly girl."

" ....."

I slowly relaxed the grip I had on my fists. *Ayako doesn't really mean what she said*, Those words of President Yuasa echoed in my head.

I could feel the cold breeze blowing through my track suit.

Under such a breeze, I could barely hear Kouchi-sempai clearing her throat,

"It just couldn't leave me be,"

" ..... ?"

"I did read it, but only half way before stopping. Though I couldn't bring myself to throw it away. But I still won't read it, do you know why?"

I shook my head.

I couldn't see her expression from behind, but I could hear her laughing softly,

"You said I'd understand it I read it, right? Yeah, I did understand. A lot. But, I couldn't bring myself to admit it.

"What about you? What if a friend who has never read any manga before decided to write one herself and comes up with something like that..... you'd normally think it'd be ridiculous, right?"

" ....."

What about you?

I couldn't understand why she would never read a manga written by her friend.

..... No, was that really what I think?"

What if Chi-chan suddenly decided to draw a manga?

And what if she ended up creating a masterpiece like *Ashes at Dusk*?

Would I be able to read it smiling?

Kouchi-sempai stopped her scribbling. Her words have been unusually calm,

"So I hid it away in a box and stored it way inside. To the point where I could not see it and tell myself such a masterpiece doesn't exist. But it just

couldn't let me be. Who would have thought a copy sold in last year's Kanya Festival would end up reappearing in the hands of a first year? And during Kanya Festival to boot.

" .....It must be fate,"

Sempai said while putting the cap back on her pen. As though leaping, she pushed herself away from the handrail. Waving her hand, she headed towards the school building. Without looking at me, she said,

"I'm sorry that you went through the trouble of showing me this, but I won't read it. Since it's not yours, you'll have to return it to its owner. Because, you know?

"If I read it, I'll have to call her. And I'd have to say 'I read it, it was amazing! I look forward to your next piece!' That's not something I'd want to say, you know?"

I wasn't able to stop Kouchi-sempai from leaving. Walking lightly as though nothing had happened, she disappeared from my sight. All this time, she never saw me in the face.

It was then I noticed the doodle that she had scribbled on the handrail. It was a semi-deformed character, an anthropomorphic cat. He wasn't wearing anything in particular except for a pair of baggy boots..... I realized I had seen this character before, and I whispered,

"This is. .....from *Body Talk*,"

I see.

So that's why.

Both of my treasured mangas *Ashes at Dusk* and *Body Talk* were amazing. But if I had to choose one out of those two, I would have to pick *Ashes at Dusk* after some agonizing.

And I realized Kouchi-sempai would also come to the same conclusion.

I.....

In comparison to *Ashes at Dusk* and *Body Talk*, I was reminded of how boring my own manga was, and suddenly I felt myself tearing up.....

5.4 - Behind the Stage

060 - ♠17

Noon. The third day of the Kamiyama High School Cultural Festival.

The bicycle parking lot.

There's only four hours until the Closing Ceremony..... We don't really have a lot of time.

I'm feeling hungry, but I'm gonna have to hold it in. Though I may have my boxed lunch here, but it just wouldn't feel right.

The school radio broadcast should begin anytime now. Would Chitanda be able to perform as expected? If she was the same as the previous two days, then it'll be game over by the time the programme starts, as she'll probably right off the bat say "Please buy the Classics Club anthologies!"

Besides us, there was no one else around. There were no walls, just the lonely sight of an elongated roof covering the parked bicycles, a far cry from the lively atmosphere of the Cultural Festival. I put down the shoulder bag I was holding, as it was quite heavy, and instantly felt a relief on my shoulders.

"What's that for?"

He asked, I replied in a nonchalant manner,

"In short, I didn't come all this way just for nothing,"

"It's not a bribe, is it?"

"Well, not quite, but close enough,"

I smiled bitterly.

"I'll get straight to the point. You must be 'Juumoji', right?"

"Hmm?"

Unexpectedly, "Juumoji" smiled at my suggestion,

"Surely that's just a wild guess?"

"Chances of making a correct wild guess would have been less than one in a thousand. It's not that simple."

"As I don't really have that much free time, so I'll at least hear what you've got to say,"

As he said that, he leaned against a nearby pole. I took out a greeting card from my pocket,

"In a hurry huh? Well, so am I. I'll make this as short as possible.

"First, this is the card that's left in the scene of crime. Why would the culprit use the word 'lost' to describe items being taken? To be precise, what was the difference between 'lost' and 'stolen'?"

He showed some interest, though his expression remained unmoved.

"There wouldn't be much difference whether the A Capella Club had things stolen or lost. Yet along the way, something was not merely stolen, but completely destroyed. And that was a major hint. You have stolen everything from that, but why is that?"

While the "Juumoji" Incident was foretold in *Ashes at Dusk*, but the connection is still very weak. There must be some other meaning.

"The odd one out would be [KU]. You had skipped [KU] and didn't steal anything from that.

"Of course, had you followed the greeting card's procedure, then you wouldn't have 'stolen' from [KU], but make it 'lose' something.

"The question now would be, why would you not have [KU] lose anything?

By skipping one character, you would have destroyed the meaning behind the word 'Juumoji' (ten characters). While Satoshi said it's because the Global Act Club was so heavily guarded that you've opted to avoid it, I do not believe that is the case. If we follow 'Juumoji's' modus operandum, it just wouldn't feel natural. It would feel totally random for you to just skip one character and then target [SA] as the final target," (TL Note [SA] comes after [KU] in the Gojuuon)

I took a brief pause. As my throat was getting dry from the low moisture,

"To abandon the aesthetics of keeping within ten characters would be too unnatural, no matter how I think about it, it doesn't make sense for you to skip [KU]. But what if you had not abandoned that aesthetic, what if you had stuck to the natural order of things? In other words, what if 'Juumoji' had actually worked according to plan?

" What if you had also made [KU] lose something?

"Based on the message on these greeting cards, your message would have been: '[KU] had already lost something to begin with, so there was nothing to take from it'. What if that were true?"

I took a glimpse at his expression, which remained unchanged. Was he prepared for me to turn him in, or did I guess incorrectly? No, there was no sign of weakness from him. Then I'll have to go on,

"How about this? 'The owner of [KU] has lost something beginning with [KU] to begin with. - Juumoji' Indicating that it was not 'Juumoji' that had taken from [KU],"

Silence. Expecting that he would make no response, I went on,

"This is actually an accusation. Telling the victim that they have lost something on their own. In other words, the 'Juumoji' Incident actually contains a hidden message. A message intended for the owner of [KU],"

For the first time, 'Juumoji' replied,

"That would have been a very elaborate hidden message, there's no way it could be relayed,"

"You're right. Normally it would have been impossible,"

"Then we're not going where if it was impossible to begin with."

But that is not true,

"It would be a different story altogether if the owner of [KU] has a way of interpreting the message. You would send the message, and [KU] would decipher it. It would not be impossible then,"

"*If,*"

"But it's not just if, as you have already created such a method, which I believe can be found in the plot of *Ashes at Dusk*,"

He had been able to remain calm until now, yet his eyes widened upon hearing the title *Ashes at Dusk*, as though saying "How did you know such a title?" He would have lost had he uttered that loud. Calming myself, even if he had not reacted as expected, I decided to continue in my usual tone,

"*The Kudryavka Sequence* is inspired by Agatha Christie's best known work, from which the 'Juumoji' Incident is born. Using *The Kudryavka Sequence* as a benchmark, the hidden message would be solved and the owner of [KU] would be. "

I looked up at him,

"Kugayama Muneyoshi **([KU]GAYAMA陸山)**, President of the Student Council, and illustrator of *Ashes at Dusk*. Am I right?"

Concealing his unease, he placed his hand under his chin and began thinking. As though pondering his next time, slowly he began speaking,

"'Juumoji' only targets clubs, yet you say [KU] is a person's name? It doesn't make sense,"

A swift response.

"The name 'Juumoji' merely hints that there would be ten targets, no where

does it say that he would only target clubs,"

"Now that's stretching it,"

"Not really. As the culprit, you have already provided a list of targets to begin with.

"Why would the culprit leave behind not just a greeting card, but a copy of the *Kanya Festival Guide*? The clue can be found in Christie's *The A.B.C. Murders*, the guide is actually a list of the targets. By leaving a page open when leaving behind each copy of the *Kanya Festival Guide*, you had wanted to give people a fair chance of guessing. I'm guessing *The Kudryavka Sequence* would also be something like that had it been published. The opened page contains not only a list of participating clubs and comments,"

In other words, it's this page:

Light Music Club Though we're more of a band, this time we'll be registering as the Light Music Club. All day in the Martial Arts Dojo.

Go Club Beginners Seminar in Preparation Room No. 2. There will of course be tutorial matches as well.

A Capella Club Stationed at Class 3-C. Will be performing in the School Courtyard on Day 1 at 11am. Please come listen!

Wall Newspaper Club Special Edition published every two hours during Kanya Festival. Featuring the latest and hottest topics being discussed.

The Cooking Club Cooking battle "Wild Fire" on the School Grounds on Day 2 at 11am! Seeking participants.

Gardening Club Cooking harvested sweet potatoes..... But this isn't gardening, it's farming! Are you sure this is okay, prez?

Brass Band Club Performing a different song everyday from 1pm in the Gymnasium.

Magic Club Stall at 2-D classroom. Stage performance Day 1 at 11:30am. Please look forward to it.

Fortune Telling Association Next to the stairs on the 3rd floor.

Classics Club Why is the Kami High Cultural Festival called the "Kanya Festival"? The answer is in our anthology *Hyouka*. 200yen per volume in the Geology Lecture Room.

Organizing Committee

Kugayama Muneyoshi (Student Council President, Kanya Festival

Executive Committee President) You guys are overdoing this. That's all I'll say.

Yazaki Keita (Student Council Vice President) The Organizing Committee can be found in the Student Council Room. Do visit us if there's anything you wish to discuss.

"The list of targets can all be found in page 33. This explains seemingly random choices like how The Cooking Club ([O] RYOURI KENKYUUKAI) was targeted over the Occult Studies Club ([O]KARUTO KENKYUUKAI), or the Gardening Club ([E]NGEI BU) over the Film Studies Club ([E]IGA KENKYUUKAI). Rather than a declaration of crime, this *Kanya Festival Guide* is more like an advanced notice,"

"....."

"Furthermore, on page 33, there are no clubs that begin with [KU], yet there is a person's name, that of President Kugayama,"

I made a deep breath before going on,

"Let's take a brief detour. By this point, we can guess as to what sort of person 'Juumoji' is, and which club he belongs to. It would be too random for all the targeted clubs to fall so neatly into the same page. The only people capable of manipulating the order of how the clubs are displayed would be the General Committee, the greeting cards would be by the same people as well,

"By the way, concerning The Cooking Club. I had confirmed with their president that they had prepared a ladle before the tournament. For an item to be prepared before a tournament to go missing, the suspect must be involved with the tournament preparation somehow. Satoshi probably had so much fun that he probably didn't work much, but I'm guessing the General Committee had a hand in helping out with the tournament preparation, right?"

He could do nothing but smile bitterly. In which case, it makes my explanation much simpler,

"Well, there are like twenty people or more in the General Committee. So this would not be enough to pinpoint the culprit,

"On the other hand, I also know that Anjou Haruna, the author of *Ashes at Dusk*, and President Kugayama, whom she worked with, would also know about *The Kudryavka Sequence*. In other words, Kugayama should be able to decipher the message hidden in the 'Juumoji' Incident,

"Then what about the culprit, 'Juumoji'? Who is this person that was mimicking the plot of *The Kudrayvka Sequence* in an attempt to relay a message to Kugayama?

"We have a ten character rule starting with [A], and an accusation that 'something has already been lost to begin with'

"Now this is a bold speculation, but what if the message was Kugayama had lost the manuscript for *The Kudryavka Sequence*? Something which Anjou Haruna, who had left Kami High, had left behind. Perhaps the culprit could not forgive Kugayama, who had wasted the preview that 'Ajimu Takuha' had written, and thus instigated the 'Juumoji' Incident.

"In other words, the culprit's message would be: 'Kugayama **([KU]GAYAMA)** has lost *The Kudryavka Sequence* **([KU]DORIYAFUKA NO JUNBAN)** '.

"Finally, the afterword of *Ashes at Dusk* was written by neither Anjou nor Kugayama, but by a third person in charge of the background drawings. So 'Juumoji' is none other this third member of 'Ajimu Takuha',"

From the shoulder bag on the ground, I took out a copy of *Ashes at Dusk*. I showed him the cover, which clearly shows the author's name "AJIMU TAKUHA".

" 'Ajimu Takuha' is a rare pen name. I heard it's named after some town in Kyushu. This may be a bit stretching it, but what if this pen name was a composite of the names of the three creators of *Ashes at Dusk*? For example, if Tarou ([TA]ROU) and Jirou ([JI]ROU) had formed a unit, its name would be 'Taji' ([TA][JI]),

"We have Anjou Haruna **([A]NJOU [HA]RUNA)**,

"We also have Kugayama Muneyoshi **([KU]GAYAMA [MU]NEYOSHI)**,

"From 'Ajimu Takuha' **([A][JI][MU] [TA][KU][HA])**, we can deduce the third person's name by taking off the initial characters of the other two. That would leave [JI] and [TA],

"The culprit would be amongst the second years that have participated in last year's Cultural Festival, who is a member of the General Committee, whose names contains the characters [TA] and [JI], who is close to Kugayama, and who is familiar with drawing manga. There can only be one person who fits the above description,"

I spoke in a calm tone that surprises even myself,

"It would be you, Tanabe Jirou-sempai. **([TA]NABE [JI]ROU)**"

"That's amazing. I would never have thought anyone else besides Mune and Anjou-san would be able to decipher such a message,"

Tanabe clapped his hands. I meekly accepted his applause, as I didn't expect to be praised for this. Leaving that aside, I began to speak more frankly,

"What I don't understand is why you would go through such lengths just to convey a message? Surely you could have just told him directly,"

As I said that, I began to guess what his answer would be. And as expected, Tanabe smiled bitterly,

"I would have told him already if I could. And besides. .....you must have vaguely guessed it yourself, as to why I would use such a method,"

While he flatters me too much, it's true that I've vaguely guessed the reason,

"This Cultural Festival is exactly one year since you've published *Ashes at Dusk*, so could this act be your way of expressing your sentiment to Anjou Haruna's departure?"

"Heh, sentiment, huh? That could be true, and since it's the Cultural Festival, it could be a desire to pull a prank as well. It's boring being stuck in the conference room all day, you know. So I decided to have some fun,"

Sentiment and fun. For him to carry out the "Juumoji" Incident just for these reasons, Tanabe's values sure contrast largely with my own energy-conserving ones.

Speaking in a faint voice that was hard to hear, he added,

" .....But the most important reason, was because I was unable to tell him so,"

I knew nothing about Tanabe or Kugayama. There's no reason for me to know what had happened between these two. And to be honest, I'm not interested. So I cleared my throat.

From here on is the main dish.

I slightly lowered my voice,

"Well then, now comes the negotiation.

"Besides accepting your applause, there's something else that I would like you to help out with,"

"Hmm, and what would that be?"

Even faced with a deal that concerns whether I could turn him in, Tanabe didn't look the least bit anxious. The biggest reaction I've seen from him so far was when I uttered the title for *The Kudryavka Sequence*. He sure has some guts.

"Oh, it's simple really,"

I took out the items from the shoulder bag,

" .....I'd like you to buy these,"

The items were of course the *Hyouka* anthologies.

This was my plan to expand sales: Expose "Juumoji's" identity, and then have him buy the *Hyouka* copies, in bulk. Compared to trying to appeal ourselves through tournaments, this was way more efficient.

"The anthology *Hyouka*, 30 copies in total,"

"What are you. .....some gangster?"

"What're you talking about?"

"After finding out that I'm 'Juumoji', you're now asking me to buy these anthologies from you,"

I find it troubling to be described as some shady character, so I smiled bitterly and said,

"Oh, no, of course not. I won't go so far as to extort money from you personally. That's not what I was thinking,"

" .....I don't get it. Then what do you intend to do with those anthologies if you're not selling them?"

"I did say I was going to sell them, however, the ones buying would be,"

I took a deep breath,

"The General Committee,"

"That's rid-"

Tanabe's face went pale. It would be bothersome if he were to raise a commotion, so I continued,

"It's not ridiculous at all.

"I saw it, on the Kamiyama High School home page. You guys are putting merchandise from the Cultural Festival on sale there, aren't you? And since these anthologies are related to the Cultural Festival, it wouldn't be out of place, would they? You can simply buy them in the General Committee's name and then put them up on the site for sale,"

Tanabe was at a lost for words. He went into thought for a while before saying,

" .....These anthologies, they're not really that popular, are they?"

"In other words, you'll agree to put them on sale if they're popular enough?"

So he's unable to make such an easy commitment, or something like that. Tanabe began choosing his words carefully,

"*If* they're popular. To begin with, we had a lot of trouble trying to sell most of the items on the site. We would have asked you already if we had wanted to put those anthologies on the site for sale. That's how these sites work anyway .....So you're gonna need a very good reason for us to accept such an offer,"

Understood. However,

"But *Hyouka* will be popular,"

"How so?"

"Thanks to the 'Juumoji' Incident, of course. You need to complete the sequence all the way to [KO] or your message wouldn't be conveyed, right? In that case, how about having fun together with others for the finale?

"Me and Fukube Satoshi will be able to provide support for your final target. You won't find insiders willing to assist you in other targets.

"The final target, the Classics Club, will be packed with people. Regardless of whether the anthology itself is popular or not, it's sure to sell like hot cakes anyway. So not only do you have a reason for putting them on the site for sale, you get to complete what you have started. How about that?"

Now how will it go?

If Tanabe were to lash out, then my plan would have failed. Not only would we not be able to sell all the *Hyouka* copies, I would have created a grudge with Tanabe. It's a risky move, but in order to achieve the impossible task of selling 200 copies of anthologies, this was a risk worth taking. Not to mention we have to sell as many copies as possible, though we weren't able to keep things simple.....

I held my breath and waited for Tanabe's judgement. Oh man, I'm getting nervous.

Why're you not saying anything, Tanabe? You wouldn't have anything to lose in such a deal.

..... Or was he concerned about being blackmailed into such a deal? No, it can't be, but my heart is getting noisy by the second.

And then Tanabe.....

Made a relaxed expression and said,

"I see, it does sound like a good deal. It is as you say, we can't leave the 'Juumoji' Incident incomplete like that. And it's time the web store needs

some restocking, so I'd say we have common interests,"

If I could, I would breath many sighs of relief. After breathing a sigh, which turned out to be a deep one, as I didn't realize I had held my breath for that long. Looks like my plan had worked.

Tanabe returned to his relaxed demeanor. Smiling gently, he asked,

" .....So, how do you plan on assisting 'Juumoji' on his final target?"

Ah.

Actually, this idea came from a recent news about a power outage in Fukui Prefecture,

"The Classics Club would prepare a 'Proofread Manuscript' ([KO]URYOU GENKOU 校了原稿). I'll convince Chitanda..... our president about it, and will put a guard around it so no one could get near,"

"I see,"

Looks like Tanabe wasn't too concerned about following the exact plot of *The Kudryavka Sequence*, and was really enjoying what I was suggesting,

"Then what happens next?"

"I'd like you to obtain two items, from the Chemistry Club and the Confectionery Studies Club respectively. I saw it on the *Kanya Festival Guide*, the Chemistry Club seems to be doing some demonstration on the power of sodium. I'd like you to try and get some of that sodium. The Confectionery Studies Club consists of two people selling biscuits around the school. They have a Glock 17 water pistol with them, try and ask them to lend it to you,"

Tanabe widened his eyes,

" .....You sure think of some dangerous stuff,"

I smiled vaguely,

"It's a festival, and it's also the finale, so let's go with a bang.

"I'll try and place the sodium between the pages of the proofread manuscript. And then wait for my signal, since it wound't be fun if the 'Juumoji' Incident ended before the *Hyouka* copies had sold out after all. So wait for my signal before you fire the water pistol. If you conceal your hands with a *Hyouka* copy and stand behind Satoshi, it would be unlikely you'd be caught,"

"And what if the pages catch fire?"

"I'll use as little sodium as possible. What's most important is that a spark is made, even if just for a moment. Just enough for a small hole to burn through the manuscript so that everyone could see,"

Placing his hand on his chin, Tanabe smiled,

"Hmm. ..... This would require some effort. I know some people from the Chemistry Club, so that wouldn't be a problem. As for the Confectionery Studies Club, if I can't them, I'll use the one I borrowed from the Gardening Club. ..... And what about the greeting card?"

I nodded,

"Place it between one of the *Hyouka* copies, and then drop it at the first chance you get. Or place it in the desk drawer if that's impossible. There'll be many people by then, so it shouldn't be a problem,"

"No, it's better if you just prepare it before hand. Try to keep the procedures during the crime as simple as possible,"

I see, you have a point. Guess I'll take it.

"Then I suppose you'll be needing this copy of 'Hyouka' for that purpose,"

"You're a shrewd one,"

"We're the ones in trouble here, after all,"

Tanabe smiled bitterly and handed 200 yen over.

"I'll give the signal by making eye contact with you,"

"Understood.....By the way, what's your name?"

Oh dear me, where're my manners? I purposely cleared my throat and announced,

"Oreki Houtarou, of Class 1-B,"

As we parted ways, Tanabe spoke as though it were nothing,

"You said that the 'Juumoji' Incident was an elaborate hidden message for Kugayama, right?"

Carrying the shoulder bag, I turned around and said,

"Yeah,"

"And you said that the message was Kugayama had lost *The Kudryavka Sequence*,"

"Was I wrong?"

Yet his voice was soft. I could only imagine as to what Tanabe had wanted to convey to Kugayama.

Tanabe's voice went softer. I could not understand what he was thinking then,

"No, you guessed wrongly, but I don't blame you for that. The only other person who would get the message would be Anjou-san,"

Hmm?

"Not both Kugayama and Anjou?"
"Mune, Kugayama wouldn't get the message,"

What's going on? I was starting to get confused,

"But Anjou Haruna has....."

"She's transferred, so she probably didn't come today,"

"Then, your target was?"

As though enjoying the reversal of roles, Tanabe smiled bitterly,

"It's Kugayama, as you've guessed. Though the message was different.

"The original message was supposed to be 'Kugayama, *The Kudryavka Sequence* is slipping away from you', in other words,

"'Kugayama, do you not intend to draw Anjou-san's story?'"

Ah.

"A plead, huh?"

"Not even that,"

Tanabe's smile remained, but it was one of jaded realization,

"Kugayama never felt like drawing manga.

"You've read it, right? I knew Anjou-san was a genius, but I never knew Mune could draw this well. Artistic sense is not something you could describe in words, but if you've seen his works, then you could have said that he's got some artistic sense,

"Yet he doesn't seem interested in it. The manuscript for *The Kudryavka Seqence* does exist. I have a copy, and Mune should have a copy as well. It was a great story. If Mune had the will to draw it, it will be a work that would surpass even *Ashes at Dusk*. Yet for Mune, drawing manga for a year

seems to be merely a fun detour for him,"

That would be.....

The image of the *Ashes at Dusk* manga I received from my sis flashed in my head. It was a great manga, the drawings were amazing. And yet to call such drawings a fun detour.

As though reading my thoughts, Tanabe said,

"It's a waste, right? You'd feel pity for it, right?

"It's ridiculous. For him to have skills which I could never have even if I spend years working on it, Mune completely has no intention of drawing. I would do anything just for him to say yes. And so I waited. From an unskilled amateur like me, Mune was a star of hope. So I couldn't bear watching him like this. He's a smart guy, even without Anjou-san's manuscript, he would have come up with another classic,"

Even though he was still smiling, his words were nothing but sadness. I could feel it from beneath his words,

"It is from such a despairingly wide gap that expectations were born. Yet if such expectations were unanswered, one would be left with disappointment. For the past year, I had believed that Mune would draw once again, and once again, I had expectations of Mune,"

I now get it, what Tanabe intended to convey to Kugayama.

Tanabe stopped speaking and stared at the ground. If expectations were born from such a despairingly wide gap, then as someone who has no idea how wide that gap is, I have no way of knowing how bad that expectation was. Neither would I know admiration or have stars in my eyes.

..... Would there come a day when I would find myself in such a "sequence"?

However, even now, I understood the meaning behind Tanabe's actions.

And so I spoke,

"So, what you really wanted to convey in the 'Juumoji' Incident..... a question that you were unable to ask directly, 'Kugayama, have you read *The Kudryavka Sequence* yet?'"

Tanabe slowly raised his head,

"You really are something,"

"And your answer is?"

"Yeah, it's as you say.

"Mune has never gone to read the manuscript that Anjou-san had spent her entire energy writing. The hidden message was never deciphered, and he never did receive the message,"

So, has your expectation turned into disappointment?

Even I had the sense to not utter such a question. Without saying anything, I turned around.

Turning my head one more time, I saw Tanabe still standing there.

The school radio began broadcasting,

" .....Anyway, we've now come to the final day of the Kanya Festival. The topic of the day is of course the 'Juumoji' Incident....."

[88 COPIES REMAINING]

6 - And So It Ends

066 - ♠19

"So, how many copies do we have remaining in the end?"

I quietly turned the cardboard boxes upside down.

Only five copies of *Hyouka* fell from the boxes. The "Juumoji" effect was amazing, in more than one way.

"W, wow, to think we would come this far.....!"

Satoshi said filled with emotions.

"But. .....it's such a pity, to have just this little remaining,"

Chitanda was surprisingly aggressive.

As for Ibara,

"......And I thought it was going to be hopeless, and was thinking about how I could make up for it....."

Her voice trembled as she said.

We managed to go past the break-even point. If we consider the copies Irisu sold for us, we actually made a profit. Sadly school rules dictate that all club profits are to be returned to the school. Guess I'm aggressive myself, sort of.

"But, did we really sell over a hundred copies in the afternoon?"

No matter how emotional she was, Ibara was still pretty sharp. As there was no longer any reason to hide this, I cleared my throat and said,

"Actually, I've arranged for *Hyouka* to be put on sale on the Kamiyama

High School website. I've handed 30 copies to the General Committee,"

"Wha? When?!"

Chitanda's eyes became round.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to surprise you. I just didn't have the chance to tell you,"

The first half was true, the second half was a lie.

"But Oreki, what if the site couldn't sell all of them?"

"That wouldn't be a problem at all!"

My accomplice Satoshi cheerfully patted Ibara on the shoulder,

"As the copies have all been purchased by the General Committee, they're the General Committee's problem now. The Classics Club has nothing to do with them,"

"Oreki-san, when did you make such a deal..... I didn't realize at all,"

Well, I made sure you didn't realize when I made the deal, after all.

Before I realized it was Tanabe, I had already planned on selling the *Hyouka* copies to "Juumoji" to begin with. Depending on who it was, I could make some adjustments to my plan depending on the level of risk. To be precise, I resorted to blackmail, which was something I could never tell Chitanda.

So "Juumoji" turned out to be Tanabe, which makes things easier since he's with the General Committee. Instead of an extortion, I was able to make a decent transaction with him, which was lucky for me and for the Classics Club. Come to think of it, it was strange for me to take on the role of the blackmailer.

That's right, thinking back, these three days have been fortunate. Not just the existence of the web store, but we were also lucky that "Juumoji's" final target, a club that began with [KO] was us as well. Receiving a copy of

Ashes at Dusk from my sis of all people can also be attributed to luck, as without *Ashes at Dusk*, it was impossible to solve the "Juumoji" Incident. According to Satoshi, those detective wannabes sure went around for nothing, with the conditions they have, it was not possible for them to solve this. The ones who came closest were me, and probably Satoshi if I had to pick a second person. The fact that I managed to find Tanabe was really down to luck. And I have no idea what that Straw Millionaire thingy was for. Could anyone care to enlighten me on that?

Still, wouldn't this be a perfect application of my favourite proverb "Good things come to those who wait"? If you sit quietly, fortune will come upon you. While it may apply to me, I'm not sure about Satoshi or Chitanda, though.

Anyway, what should we do with the remaining five copies?

"There's no point leaving them behind. Let's each buy one copy,"

We quickly accepted Satoshi's suggestion, and each placed 200 yen into the candy box.

Chitanda held her copy to her chest, Satoshi put his in his drawstring bag, while Ibara caressed the cover with her hand.

That leaves just one copy.

….. I placed another 200 yen.

"Huh, Houtarou?"

"I'll place this one in my sis's room,"

It's thanks for the manga she gave me. I'm not sure if she knows it's me thanking her. If she has no use for it, I can always use it as a pot stand.

I picked up the last copy.
We looked at the empty cardboard box.

As though flushed with emotions, Chitanda said first,

"We've, sold out,"

"Sold out….. "

"S, sold out. …. "

Sold out huh?

The dark brown coloured mountain of despair that we saw on the first day has now been completely flattened.

However Chitanda continued, as though spellbound,

"All that's left is the 'Juumoji' Incident. I can now put all my attention and curiosity into it,"

"Ah, about that,"

Satoshi smiled and said,

"I think Houtarou has figured something out,"

"Eh, really?"

Suddenly, Chitanda's gaze changed as she approached me. Hey, you don't have to come so close, do you know how many times you've startled me like that?

Even if I don't panic, we still had a lot of time. As though escaping Chitanda's large eyes staring at me in close distance, I leaned back towards the back of my chair and said,

"Well, about that, how about we have a party as well to go along with it? To celebrate us selling out?"

"W, what in the world has happened? Oreki actually making a suggestion?!"

What's that supposed to mean? Talking as though you've seen the world.

At once, Satoshi sprang up,

"I agree! Even the Disciplinary Committee are having a party! Only a party can dispel the sorrows of this fleeting life, after all! And it's Sunday tomorrow, so why not?"

Ibara, whose has been looking gloomy for some reason for the past three days, finally lightened up,

"Yeah, you're right. I've not been able to appear in the Classics Club these past few days. I'd like to hear what's been happening. ..... Something interesting has happened, right?"

Looking aside, Chitanda made a calm smile. By making such an elegant smile, she really looks graceful like that. This is so unfair.

"Then how about we have it at my place? While it's not really lively, you're more than welcome to come,"

Chitanda's place, huh? It's a bit far, but, it's wide and quiet. So I'm thankful for that.

"Then it's decided. Shall we go,"

"Yeah, school's closing soon,"

"Oh! How about I make some sushi?"

"Chi, Chi-chan, you're really modest..... "

As if on cue, the chime rang as we all stood up.

It was a chime signalling students to go home, a chime to declare the three day Cultural Festival has come to its end. It also felt like a chime to celebrate a satisfactory conclusion to things.

I'm sure we all felt the same way.

[SOLD OUT]

Afterword

Hello, this is Yonezawa Honobu.

The most vivid memory of any school Cultural Festival that I've been to was that of a girl in the Literature Club. She would bring a chair out into the dim corridor where the sun could not reach, alongside a few anthology copies, and would sit there all day reading books.

That year, I was put in charge of writing the script for a mystery movie that my class was making. As the movie was completed, I was free to do anything I like. And so I bought an anthology copy from her, but I have no memory of having read it.

This was because I had already brought my own book to kill time with.

The centrepiece for this volume is none other than the Cultural Festival. For a formless event to take centre stage, I had to present it using multiple points of views. This was required not just by the setting, but also by the story, or else the whole book would consist of nothing but the protagonist sitting on his chair.

When this book was finally ready for publication, I was stuck in coming up with a title. Though the story began in the eve of a festival, and ended at the end of it, I just couldn't think of any other title besides "Cultural Festival" or "School Festival". Though it's titled *The Kudryavka Sequence*, I feel its subtitle would be more fitting for the volume as a whole.

In the afterword of the first volume *Hyouka*, I said I'd reveal the truth of a certain mystery, which I had intended to do so in the afterword of the second volume. But I ran out of pages.

Anyway, it's been seven years since *Hyouka* was first published. In these seven years, the series has managed to survive thanks to all you readers. The answer to the "Sushi Incident" which I've mention in the afterword of that volume is actually hinted at in Chapter 2-1 (009 - ♣03), I wonder how many of you had realized that? It's not really that much of a mystery, or it would have taken an entire chapter..... Furthermore, in the afterword of *The Credit Roll of the Fool* in which I mentioned about the meaning of each chapter title, in short, the main theme would be "agitation".

This ends the current volume. I hope you all enjoyed the carnival in *The Kudryavka Sequence*, and look forward to the next carnival.

Yonezawa Honobu

April 2008

Translator's Notes and References

1. ↑ A small, portable Shinto shrine - Wikipedia
2. ↑ A traditional Japanese style of poetry anthology of 100 waka poems where each contributor writes one poem - Wikipedia
3. ↑ A traditional Japanese string instrument - Wikipedia
4. ↑ A traditional Japanese storytelling style where the storyteller sits seiza style on the stage with a paper fan and tells a story that is usually long and comical - Wikipedia
5. ↑ Japanese flower arranging - Wikipedia
6. ↑ An Italian film - Wikipedia
7. ↑ An award for the best sci-fi literature published in the preceding year - Wikipedia
8. ↑ Tank desant - Wikipedia
9. ↑ Wikipedia - They Were Eleven
10. ↑ Wikipedia - Manzai
11. ↑ Wikipedia - Cheongsam
12. ↑ Wikipedia - Mao Suit
13. ↑ Wikipedia - Jiang Shi
14. ↑ Wikipedia - Zeami Motokiyo
15. ↑ Wikipedia - Kanami
16. ↑ Wikipedia - Tsurezuregusa
17. ↑ Wikipedia - Gomoku
18. ↑ Wikipedia - Rennyo
19. ↑ Read the Source Online
20. ↑ Wikipedia - Jintan
21. ↑ Oreki is confusing the customs of Halloween and the Japanese holiday Setsubun - Wikipedia
22. ↑ Wikipedia - Straw Millionaire
23. ↑ Wikipedia - Nasi Goreng
24. ↑ Wikipedia - Gojuuon
25. ↑ Wikipedia - Awamori
26. ↑ Wikipedia - Japanese Diacritics (In Japanese, KI becomes GI with the addition of a diacritic mark)
27. ↑ Wikipedia - El Bimbo
28. ↑ Wikipedia - Hanafuda (Japanese card game)

29. ↑ Wikipedia - Lajos Kossuth
30. ↑ http://atomrocks.edublogs.org/hyotantsugi-a-k-a-gourdski/
31. ↑ You can find more information and an explanation of this proverb here
32. ↑ The Prodigy is an English electronic dance music band.